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"WEATHERING THE STORMS IN MINISTRY": A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RETIRED CLERGY AND THEIR FOUNDATIONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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“Weathering the Storms in Ministry”: A Phenomenological Study of Retired Clergy and Their Foundational Spiritual Practices

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This study examines the experiences of retired clergypersons from The United Methodist Church who served for more than twenty-five years in northern Illinois. Utilizing the Interpretive Phenomenological Approach, seven detailed ministry narratives are analyzed to identify the spiritual disciplines that sustained these individuals throughout their vocational journeys. The research affirms the vital role of specific spiritual practices in supporting clergy well-being and recommends that local churches and those managing clergy credentialing and appointments consider adjustments to their processes to enhance the vitality and health of local congregations and the denomination as a whole.

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Chapter 1

Weathering the Storms in Ministry

A lifetime spent surrounded by a community of love, beautiful music, weekly inspirational encounters, free, bottomless coffee, and activities that help people, while earning a salary, seems like a dream job and an ideal life. From a distance, life in church ministry appears to be a manageable and fulfilling vocation of care and leadership. However, the lived reality for today's diverse clergy tells a far more complex and challenging story. While ministry offers inevitable moments of gratification and joy, they do not nullify the encounters of pain, exhaustion, and even trauma that accompany living out a divine call and the natural ebbs and flows of human life.

Bruce Garner, a pastor and author, writes in his book *The Resilient Pastor: How to Remain Effective and Finish Well in Ministry*:

> We are quickly losing pastors in America. Blogs, books, and social media all tell the same story: pastors are underpaid, overworked, stressed out, and failing. In worst and most high-profile stories they are. . . well, you name it: having affairs, embezzling money, mistreating staff, or simply abandoning the Christian faith. Meanwhile, a lot (my research says a lot) of pastors are just getting really, really tired. They are tired of missing budget, tired of congregational conflict, tired of problems with the sound system, the parking, the absentee volunteers, the deacon/elder/trustee board, the missions committee, the facilities committee, and that one guy who keeps sending them emails about how they should preach better sermons. . . Yes, pastors are quitting... [1]

Garner also states that ministry is becoming more challenging with the increasing social, economic, and political divides in the US. His observation aligns with recent findings from research studies.

[1] Bruce Garner, *The Resilient Pastor: How to Remain Effective and Finish Well in Ministry* (Saint Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2021), xv.

Christian Post reported in 2024 that more than half of American clergy have seriously considered leaving ministry.[2] The Barna Group, a non-partisan, non-profit organization, specifically compiled data through a survey, as follows:

> In the past year, 24% of U.S. senior Protestant pastors have seriously considered leaving full-time ministry —a decline from the peak levels recorded during the height of the pandemic era. . . Since 2022, the share of pastors considering quitting has steadily declined. The drop to 24% does not indicate that pastors are suddenly thriving or that the challenges of ministry have disappeared. Rather, it suggests that some of the acute pressure of the crisis years may be easing. This distinction matters. The data points to stabilization, not full recovery. Fewer pastors appear to be in immediate vocational crisis, even as many continue to carry fatigue, grief, and uncertainty about the future of ministry.[3]

The Barna Group contends that clergy in the US were abandoning their vocations before the pandemic and that this has not changed post-pandemic, suggesting that the everyday stresses that cause clergy burnout have not eased.

The findings from the Barna Group study are especially pronounced in the context of the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois. There has been a dramatic decline in the number of candidates pursuing ordination as full-time clergy. In an interview with Rev. Dr. Norval Brown, the current president of the Board of Ordained Ministry in the northern Illinois area, he shared that there will be three candidates with the potential to be ordained in 2026, while in the past two years, only three candidates were ordained as clergy. He mentioned that this was quite a shift, as there were over twenty clergypersons being ordained each year consistently before the pandemic. He raised the issue that local churches have not prioritized the formation of future pastors as they once did. He speculated that the regular hardships the clergy face have deterred people from

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[2] Leonardo Blair, "With Rising Discontent, More than Half of American Clergy Seriously Considered Quitting: Study," *The Christian Post*, January 11, 2024, https://www.christianpost.com/news/over-half-of-american-pastors-have-considered-quitting-poll.html.

[3] Barna Group, "Pastors Quitting Ministry: New Barna Data Shows a Shift," January 27, 2026, https://www.barna.com/trends/pastors-quitting-ministry-barna-data/.

pursuing a vocational life in ministry. He mentioned that during his ministry between the 1990s and 2026, clergy salaries have substantially decreased, while the workload and stress have increased. He also alluded to the fact that, because of the decline in the number of clergy and church members in local congregations, which negatively impacts the church's financial vitality, clergypersons have had to pastor more than one congregation at a time with less income. He also pointed out that, because of the increased workload, current clergypersons are less available to mentor new generations of clergy or to participate for their spiritual growth and collegiality in peer groups, which build clergy morale and aim to foster the well-being of clergy. He also mentioned that, with five to ten clergy members retiring each year, a few are asked to return to ministry to serve churches part-time due to a shortage of pastors available for part-time service. At the same time, other retirees are not offered opportunities to be involved in the life of the denomination or in the ordination process for new clergypersons.

Moreover, data collected from the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois show that in 2024, twelve clergy members opted to change their status to "no longer clergy," while in 2023, six did so. In 2022 and 2021, only one person changed their status each year. Across 330 United Methodist churches in northern Illinois, pastors currently serve an average tenure of five years in each church they are appointed to, which subjects them and their families to frequent relocation while churches experience regular leadership transitions. While approximately 20% of clergy change appointments annually, certain churches have experienced continuity with one pastor for several years, while one church had the same pastor for thirty-four years. Though the number of transitions vary each year, all clergy serve the United Methodist Church on an annual basis, which means that almost all the clergy and their family live with the uncertainty of their living and working condition for their following year—a factor of great stress. Although 146 churches

of the 330 churches in the conference have full-time clergy, more than half of those 330 churches either share clergy or rely on pastors. Furthermore, declining membership and questionable financial viability are driving more church closures and mergers in northern Illinois. In a recent conversation, a seasoned clergyperson mentioned to me that health insurance has substantially increased over the years for clergy because of their declining health and the liability they cause because of the overwhelming amount of claims that result from their physical and mental health, much of which is caused by the stresses of all that they carry in their lives.

These observations and collected data indicate that those in vocational ministry face multiple challenges that originate in the larger context to which they have dedicated their lives as their calling. All clergypersons were recognized by their colleagues, denominational leaders, and appointed persons selected to participate in the credentialing process. They received ordination after devoting themselves to diligent education, hours of training, and a rigorous credentialing process —a journey that takes anywhere from five years to a decade. Their understanding of vocational life shifts their priorities, often prompting difficult choices between the wellbeing of their ministry and their family, especially in relocations mostly initiated by denominational leadership. These clergypersons place their trust in the discernment process the denominational leaders engage in, hoping that those leaders are mindful of their unique familial situations in addition to the needs of ministry settings. With a few training sessions and antidotes offered by the denominational leaders, pastors are responsible for helping their families adapt, assimilate, and make a transition to a new ministry location, and they are also responsible for administering their new church, or churches. Although many relocations are successful, with the pastor and the church finding ways to work together peacefully, outcomes vary depending on the depth of relationships built among all those involved. However, pastors carry the most pressure since they

are held accountable by those who appointed them to succeed in ministry while also navigating the expectations of the ministry setting. All the while, they continue to fulfill their role within their family while bridging the relationship between their congregation and family, which involves shifting their priorities and attention throughout their ministry.

In this phenomenological study, participants express their experiences of challenges as they continue to heal and cope with the consequences of past decisions beyond retirement. In hindsight, each study participants carry resentment and regret, wishing their colleagues currently serving did not have to experience what they did. Throughout their ministry, these study participants lived with pain and sorrow, which consumed much of their energy and time, impacting their vocational life.

Unlike other profession, the clergy view their vocational life as a divine calling that inherently requires sacrifice. Therefore, they frequently navigate the consequences of their vocational pursuits, such as challenging ministry environments, the negative effects of relocation on family members, and the outcomes of their prioritization and boundary management, while striving to maintain their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Striving to maintain a kind of equilibrium in their personal and vocational life, where boundaries remain thin and often blurred, pastors' effectiveness in ministry is contingent on their ability to weather the storms — difficult situations that test their ability to remain anchored, grounded in endurance, and resilience.

While the decline in the vitality of the church, in this study, the United Methodist Church specifically, is devastating and disheartening, the most disconcerting aspect of the data is that the overall health of the clergy continues to suffer. As if the suffering of clergy and the are expected, the credentialing and relocation processes for the clergy and their families have normalized basic

training to focus mainly on the clergy and key leaders of the churches they will serve. As the findings of this study indicate, clergy consistently sought greater support through ongoing and relevant training while also striving to cultivate confidence in their colleagues and denominational leadership. At the same time, the training opportunities they participated in did not help them deal with crises in their vocational or personal lives. It was also evident that the spiritual practices that kept them grounded in their faith remained consistent with those before their vocational lives began, indicating that vocational training offered only occasional inspiration rather than substantial, sustaining support.

It is also unsettling that clergypersons are constantly having to prioritize their ministry setting over their families, a dynamic that has been normalized in their local churches as well as in the denominational system to which they belong. The clergyperson's (and their families') financial stability is currently deeply tied to the vitality of the ministry setting they serve. At the same time, their priorities are tethered to the expectations of their ministry setting and denominational leaders, which, in many cases, have caused their families immense pain and discomfort. This harsh reality is validated as the "just" cost of following a divine calling and taking ordination vows as a way to belong to the accountability, camaraderie, and authority received. As the stories of the clergypersons in this study reveal, all of them innately accepted a the challenges and negative consequences they continue to face as the expected price of answering their divine calling.

However, this painful reality seems far from what was observed in the early church and its leaders in the Bible. The health of early church leaders was not tied to the vitality of their churches. Rather, their physical health suffered because of their prophetic voice against Roman power and persecution. The conflicts and crises the early church leaders endured stemmed less

from finding balance or contemplating their priorities between their personal lives and their identity as a pastor than from challenges in ministry.

Consistent spiritual practices, as well as strong collegial and mentoring relationships, remained important to early church leaders, as they are today for current and retired clergy. Such practices were ways to stay connected to God and the community of faith — essential to church growth and the fulfillment of God's overall mission in the world, to make Jesus known to the ends of the earth. It was clear then that the church leaders' firm grounding in their faith and their overall spiritual and emotional health were deeply connected to the church's ability to live out its calling in the world, especially amid global challenges.

Naming What is Missing

While Garner pointed to the growing mental health challenges faced by pastors, he offered a caveat, noting that many colleagues remain resilient and committed to ministry in the midst of life's storms. This affirms critical data from the surveys conducted by the Barna Group, which offers deeper insight into what Garner observed. In 2023, the Barna Group interviewed over 500 clergy across denominations throughout the nation and reported that although 56% of Protestant pastors considered quitting full-time ministry due to the immense stresses of the job and feelings of isolation, the rest of the clergy had not considered leaving, even though they had similar experiences.[4] Their report continued:

> For instance, over four in five pastors who have not considered quitting (83%) believe in the value of their ministry. Another three-quarters feel they have a duty to stay and fulfill their calling in ministry (75%) and that they are satisfied with their job (73%). Many of these same pastors also report that their family (67%) and community (59%) support

[4] Barna Group, "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year," April 27, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/.

them well, highlighting the importance of strong, encouraging relationships in pastors' lives.[5]

Barna Group's report affirmed Garner's assessment that resilience is critical to the survival and enjoyment of pastors' vocations.[6]

As survey organizations such as the Barna Group, along with authors and pastors such as Garner, have affirmed the current realities that pastors face today, their immediate conclusion in each of their reports points to the importance of the spiritual well-being of clergy, highlighting their need for consistent support from peers, attention to personal spiritual growth, and training in building skills for strong leadership and resiliency.

The Barna Group concludes, "Overall, most pastors are confronting the same pressures and stress - but perhaps not the same levels of equipping and support." [7] Another research organization, Lifeway Research, found from its survey of 1,516 Baptist clergypersons, that it was crucial for pastors to "unplug" or remove themselves from ministerial duties at least once a week.[8] These conclusions come from the specific questions they ask about the clergy currently ministering in their context to assess their effectiveness in their ministry settings. The conclusions drawn from the national surveys parallel some of the findings of the interviews conducted in this study.

Although these survey organizations embark on critical research needed within church leadership in the US and aim to provide valid resources for churches and clergy for growth and

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[5] Barna Group, "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year," April 27, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/.

[6] Bruce Garner, *The Resilient Pastor: How to Remain Effective and Finish Well in Ministry* (Saint Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2021), xv.

[7] "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year."

[8] Thom S. Rainer, "The Dangerous Third Year of Pastoral Tenure," Church Answers, June 18, 2014, https://churchanswers.com/blog/dangerous-third-year-pastoral-tenure/.

effective ministries, their research scope remains broad, which leads them to form general conclusions. The survey questions developed by these research groups required participants to select from predetermined multiple-choice options, producing results that were easily quantified and charted. However, this format did not allow participants to express nuances or exceptions, resulting in findings that appeared clear and unambiguous but may have overlooked important complexity. Some of the findings from the interviews conducted for this study parallel these conclusions drawn from the national surveys.

While studying the resilience and endurance of clergypersons, these studies have omitted the voices of retired clergypersons —one of the largest demographics of clergypersons, who were resilient and endured a lifelong vocational life for decades.

The number of ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church has been declining since 1990.[9] The Lewis Center for Leadership reported that in 1990, the total number of "elders" or ordained clergy was 21,507; by 1995, it was 20,117.[10] Furthermore, the number of older clergy aged 55 to 70 has been increasing each year since the number of ordained clergy began to decline.[11] This means that the number of clergy retiring in the next several years will increase exponentially in the United Methodist Church.

Despite the higher number of retirees each year, their involvement and impact on the current and future vitality of the United Methodist Church remain limited. The few gatherings of retired clergy, their underrepresentation on denominational committees, and their minimal role in the process of credentialing future leaders are evidence of this gap. Furthermore, there is a lack

[9] Lewis Center for Church Leadership, "Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church: 1985–2005" (2006), https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ClergyAgeTrends06.pdf.

[10] Lewis Center for Church Leadership, "Clergy Age Trends," 7.

[11] Lewis Center for Church Leadership, "Clergy Age Trends," 7.

of publications that focus on retired clergy, although they have successfully weathered the storms of life-long ministry, having navigated decades of societal and institutional changes, as well as shifts in their personal lives. These pastors carry a lifetime of untold stories that are being lost, and their wisdom is missing from current organizational strategies and programs. It is therefore crucial to extract those stories and analyze their patterns to gain insights that can affect positive changes that would impact current and future clergy, churches, and broader religious institutions.

This study aims to amplify the voices of retired United Methodist clergy, leveraging their decades of experience, expertise, and narratives to foster resilience in active ministers while identifying strategies to enhance the effectiveness and vitality of local church practices and denominational processes. Furthermore, the goal is to align the northern Illinois United Methodist community with its divine purpose by bringing hope and new life to the world through a shift of focus toward a healthier clergy culture, fostering genuine, supportive partnerships among denominational leaders, local churches, and pastors to help them balance their vocational ministry with family life, with the help of those who faithfully served and are willing to share their experiences of pain, resentment, and regret in addition to their successes and antidotes.

Personal Goal for the Study

Sixteen years have passed since I completed my seminary education and was granted the authority and credentials to embark on my ministry journey as a full-time pastor of the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois. In the past decade and a half, I have experienced several relocations, life transitions, and shifts in my ministry roles. As I reflect on my ministry thus far, I also look to the next few decades with anticipation, expecting similar challenges and transitions. Despite the uncertainties of my future, I anticipate that societal issues on social media and within

surrounding communities will introduce new challenges and changes to my life and ministry. Further changes will impact religious institutions, which have already overwhelmed congregations and their leaders, who must deal with financial challenges and the depletion of vitality due to a decrease in membership and the growing irrelevance of faith communities in the world.

The United Methodist Church, to which I have vowed to serve, is not immune to these harsh realities. I have personally witnessed colleagues and their congregations crippled by closures, reduced salaries, and the abandonment of once-vibrant ministries. I have pondered the future of my own ministry: my ability to withstand the turbulence that shook my colleagues, my leadership capabilities to influence positive outcomes in the community and the churches I will serve, and my ability to harness the energy and drive that will help me be resilient throughout my ministry. As a single parent and caretaker of my aging parents, shifts in priorities and balancing vocational life and personal life will only increase in intensity. With these concerns, I began to search for what I was missing and where I would find inspiration and wisdom.

Growing up in South Korea, surrounded by a large extended family that revolved around the rituals of remembering and respecting ancestors, in addition to the elders of the community, I learned to value and seek the wisdom of the seasoned and the aged. With my childhood memories of sitting at the feet of my grandmother, who told stories of her experiences of devastation during war and the many storms in her life, I began to wonder what it would be like to sit at the feet of the clergy whom I admired and find commonalities with: to listen to their stories of survival and the shifts they endured. In those sacred moments of deepening my bond with my grandmother, her reflections on her successes, failures, and regrets not only connected me to my Korean heritage but also provided essential wisdom for navigating life's challenges.

My appreciation for my parents grew as I also learned to empathize with others in my community. I also learned to distinguish between the truly significant and the trivial in the grand scheme of life. This taught me to release what is unnecessary and to focus on preserving what is valuable.

Thus, my intention was to engage with retired clergy—veterans of the faith and vocational life who paved the way for me—to document the joys, regrets, and sustainable practices that defined their collective experience in ministry. And because ministry is a spiritual journey birthed and sustained by God, I sought to explore the vital practices, necessary skills, and cautionary lessons in self-care that fostered and grounded their purposeful ministry to raise my own capability to weather the uncertainties of long-term pastoral leadership I anticipated.

Meaning for My Ministry Setting

The impact of this study may influence two of the ministry settings I interact with: the local church I pastor and those I interviewed.

First, the church I am currently serving will benefit from the inspiration and knowledge I have gained from this study. As my health, capabilities, and knowledge directly impact my interactions and leadership of this congregation, I believe that the many insights received from this study will manifest in my ministry. By integrating the spiritual disciplines and the wisdom of seasoned veterans of the faith, I anticipate that my congregation will respond in ways that mirror the successes experienced by my colleagues, while avoiding potential conflicts and unnecessary disturbances that have been identified and addressed by experienced clergy in the past. As I strive for my well-being, I hope to advocate for and demonstrate welfare for my congregation, which will influence them and their surroundings.

Second, the retired pastors interviewed will be impacted by this study. In their final days of ministry, they were offered only three to five minutes during a large church-wide event to give their last words as they entered retirement. At this gathering, where hundreds of pastors and elected representatives from the local church gathered, the few pastors who accepted the invitation to speak were constrained by specific questions that strictly limited their ability to properly reflect on their lifetime of wisdom and expertise. This study offered the participants a long-awaited opportunity to reflect on their ministry, share stories of how they fostered personal growth, and extend their legacy well into their retirement years. They were given space to re-enter pleasant memories with their close friends and ministry partners while recounting their joys, successes, and achievements. They also reflected on their failures and regrets, which inspired them to revisit some of those experiences to further their learning and continued healing. The speech provided them with the opportunity to offer hard-won wisdom or advice to those who would encounter the results of this study to make an impact on the future health of their colleagues and the environment where they continue to find their identity.

Impact on the Church as a Whole

The United Methodist Church is a global religious body that maintains a rigorous and comprehensive ordination process. This collaborative journey involves both clergy and laity in the careful vetting and training of developing effective leaders. By prioritizing deep discernment, this denomination ensures that its pastors are equipped to strengthen the institution and lead meaningful, positive change worldwide. In 2011, the Church Systems Taskforce, a team formed by several key leaders of the denomination and representatives from the two agencies within the

denomination that mainly focus on supporting higher education and the holistic wellness of clergy and other ministry leaders, published a document that stated the following:

> We believe it is time to address the intersection of church systems with clergy health and make the necessary changes to sustain Christ's mission through The United Methodist Church. Improving clergy health strengthens our ministry. A denominational appreciation for the value of healthy ministry and a resolution to change what negatively impacts us will undergird our ability to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.[12]

This statement reiterated the importance of the health of ministers, which directly affects the health of churches and the mission of the denomination. Although many changes have been implemented since that declaration of intent, the continued deterioration of the church and religious leaders and pastors suggests that new perspectives that guide additional changes are necessary.

This study of the northern Illinois area aims to highlight a smaller ministry context and suggest a new approach that leverages the valuable, yet untapped, lived experiences of retired pastors. This study offers new perspectives to guide future experiments in developing programs that foster healthy clergy and shift processes that assess and equip current and future clergy, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and vitality of the United Methodist churches in the northern Illinois area and beyond.

Another expected outcome is increased appreciation for and intentional recognition of retired clergy's lived experiences, which manifests in their greater involvement in designing and leading training programs that leverage their unique expertise while mentoring current and future leaders.

[12] The Church Systems Task Force of The United Methodist Church, "Church Systems Task Force Report: Caring for Those Who Serve" (2011), https://www.wespath.org/assets/1/7/4225.pdf.

Chapter 2

Literature Reviews

This literature review examines how pastoral resilience is formed, sustained, and interpreted through narrative meaning making across the lifespan of vocational ministry. Specifically, it addresses the central research question of this study: How do retired clergy in the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois interpret their ministry experiences, and what resilience patterns emerge from their narratives over time?

To address this question, the literature was organized across four interconnected areas: (1) narrative meaning-making and sacred stories; (2) spiritual direction and practices of listening; (3) pastoral identity and leadership within the church and society; and (4) trauma, grounding, and practices of resilience. These areas collectively establish the conceptual and methodological framework for a phenomenological story-based study. Together, they demonstrate that pastoral resilience is not merely an individual psychological trait but a relational, spiritual, and interpretive practice shaped through the telling, hearing, and integration of lived experience.

Within the United Methodist Church, itinerancy, a system of traveling from church to church — as frequent as every three to five years—creates a distinctive context for examining resilience. These clergy members in northern Illinois navigate diverse congregational settings, shifting community expectations, and complex social and cultural dynamics. These conditions intensify the need for grounding practices and long-term interpretive frameworks, making this context particularly significant for studying resilience as an enduring narrative phenomenon.

For the purpose of this study, several key terms require clarification. “Story” refers to narrative identity and meaning-making practices through which individuals interpret their lived experience. “Sacred” implies the theological conviction that God is present and active within

human narratives, particularly in moments of reflection and relationships. “Resilience” is understood as a vocational and spiritual capacity to endure, adapt, and remain faithful in the face of challenges, shaped over time by practices, relationships, and reflection. “Grounding” refers to practices that anchor individuals psychologically, spiritually, and relationally amid ongoing demands.

Sacred Stories and Narrative Meaning-Making

This study begins with the assumption that every human being carries a wealth of complex and meaningful stories. Individual experiences hold intrinsic meaning within their own contexts; however, they also interact with other events to generate new interpretations over time. Narrative is, therefore, not static; it evolves through reflection and retelling.

For pastors, this dynamic is intensified by the theological weight of their calling. Rooted in the sanctity of the “other,” clergy carry the responsibility to steward not only their own stories but also the ones of those they serve. This creates a distinctive interpretive burden: pastors must continually locate the intersection among their own lived experience, their congregants' experiences, and the scriptural narrative that frames their understanding of God’s activity in the world.

Maria Liu Wong articulates this integrative process by describing theological formation as an engagement with the full complexity of life, including “struggle, lament, hope, celebration, and lessons of humility.”[1] In her book, *On Becoming Wise Together,* Wong demonstrates that learning occurs not only through formal theological education but also through lived experience, relational engagement, and reflective practices. Wong’s concept of “becoming wise together”

[1] Maria Liu Wong, *On Becoming Wise Together: Learning and Leading in the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 8.

emphasizes that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple perspectives, identities, and experiences, while it is also her way of creating a better world.[2]

The interview questions that guided the study participants' reflections explored their experiences and encouraged them to view those experiences in hindsight. The questions promoted deep reflection, not only to recall specific details of their experiences but also their thought processes, emotions, and to extract lessons learned from those experiences. Using Wong's approach of reflecting on one's experience through multiple lenses of identity, this study aimed to facilitate similar reflection, leading participants to revisit their ministry journey from the perspective of their retired identity and prompting a thorough analysis of their experience, considering the skills that grounded them in faith, where they saw the divine at work, and what they learned from those experiences.

This study utilized Wong's framework to demonstrate that pastoral resilience develops through similar integrative practices. Clergy do not simply experience ministry; they interpret it through multiple lenses—personal, communal, cultural, and theological—to positively influence the church and, in turn, create a better world. However, while Wong emphasizes the richness of this process, her book does not sufficiently address how these interpretive practices sustain clergy over decades of service, especially retirement.

Additional support for narrative meaning-making emerges from *Embodied Spirits: Stories of Spiritual Directors of Color*, which demonstrates how reflective storytelling across diverse cultural and religious contexts informs both identity and practice.[3] The main purpose of this book was to collect reflections about how spiritual directors of color, who purposely evoked

[2] Wong, *On Becoming Wise Together,* 8.

[3] Sherry Bryant-Johnson, Rosalie Norman-McNaney, and Therese Taylor-Stinson, eds., *Embodied Spirits: Stories of Spiritual Directors of Color* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

reflection and listened deeply, interacted beyond the borders of their own denominations, religions, ethnicities, and cultures. These individual stories of diverse spiritual directors articulated how the stories they encountered influenced their lives, surroundings, and perspectives, informing their practice of spiritual direction, which continues to expand throughout the world.

These narratives reveal that meaning is constructed relationally and that listening across differences within the individual and their cultural context expands interpretive depth. However, while this work emphasizes diversity and relationality, it does not focus specifically on long-term vocational resilience or the retrospective insights of retired clergy. It also does not address its impact on the larger context of the church or religious institution. This study aims to put reflection into practice to improve the holistic well-being of pastors, andto increase the overall health of local congregations, and the denomination.

Spiritual Direction and Practice of Listening

The literature on spiritual direction provides a methodological and theological foundation for this study's approach to interviewing and interpretation. Margaret Guenther frames spiritual direction as a sacred encounter in which one person listens attentively to another's story while attending to God's presence.[4] This model informs the study's interview design, which treats each conversation as a space of reverent listening rather than data extraction.

To facilitate deep sharing needed for this study, which delves further into reflection, Margaret Guenther's guidance on the art of listening was invaluable, as her work framed the interview times as sacred moments in which God was present, mirroring the settings of her

[4] Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1992).

spiritual direction sessions. She highlighted that engaging in spiritual direction involves consistent, one-directional listening. She also cautioned about the importance of the listener being self-aware, as they are also engaged in listening to their own stories, which are not shared aloud.[5] One-way conversing and listening, seeing God at work, is the journey this study is embarking on, creating that space that Guenther alludes to.

Relatedly, Michael P. Nichols further deepens this framework by emphasizing the dual function of listening:

> Listening has not one, but two purposes: taking in information and bearing witness to another's expression. By momentarily stepping out of his or her own frame of reference and into ours, the person who listens well acknowledges and affirms us. The affirmation that validation is absolutely essential for sustaining the self-affirmation known as self-respect. Without being listened to, we are shut up in the solitude of our own hearts.[6]

This insight underscores the relational and ethical dimensions of the research process by setting listening as an act that affirms identity and fosters meaning-making. This study also adopted a framework to create space for participants to feel comfortable and affirmed in their experiences, stories, and lives, which matter greatly beyond the interview moment.

An integral part of creating sacred space in this framework involved not only an internal posture of reverence toward the stories shared but also the intentional embodiment of humility and hospitality to deepen trust with participants. Margaret Guenther's guidance on preparing a welcoming environment—one that receives the stranger with openness and care[7]—proved especially formative in shaping this approach. In addition, the spiritual direction framework articulated by Marlene Kropf and Daniel Schrock, which emphasizes a high level of

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[5] Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*.

[6] Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 15.

[7] Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995).

confidentiality,[8] served as a critical foundation for the interview methodology utilized in this study.

Norvene Vest's *Tending the Holy* extends this perspective across traditions, demonstrating that practices of attentive listening and storytelling reveal divine activity in diverse contexts.[9] Through her efforts to bring together various traditions engaged in storytelling and listening, she shows that God is at work in sacred spaces as stories are transferred. Her work affirmed that the exchange of stories, even across diverse contexts, becomes an act of reverence when approached with deep attention and respect; in the careful examination of a single life and the reflection on its meaning, the divine is made present and active. Therefore, the stories collected in this study from vocational ministers with diverse backgrounds are relevant to meaning-making. As the stories are transacted in this study, the meanings that emerge transcend the generations of the clergy and diverse ministry settings.

While these sources establish the importance of listening and reflection, they tend to focus on present-moment practices rather than long-term narrative integration. This study extend the insights of the study participants by examining how reflective listening shapes immediate understanding and retrospective interpretations of resilience across a lifetime of ministry for a wider and more diverse audience in the years to come.

The Pastor in the World: Leadership and Public Witness

The pastoral ministry extends beyond the walls of the local congregation into the wider community and broader contexts in which the church is situated, shaping how pastors live out

[8] Marlene Kropf and Daniel P. Schrock, *An Open Place: The Ministry of Group Spiritual Direction* (New York: Church Publishing, 2012).

[9] Norvene Vest, *Tending the Holy: Spiritual Direction across Traditions* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003).

their vocation in both visible and less visible spaces. They are leaders in the world, stewarding stories, and their duty is to share those stories of hope, illuminated by scripture that tells of God's love for all people, reflecting both their inner formation and their outward work in ministry.

Bernadette Miles argues that spiritual direction enhances leadership by transforming the leader from within.[10] She concluded:

> Spiritual direction positively influences a person's leadership potential through the transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the *kardia.* Spiritual direction offers a framework for leaders to explore their identity as leader through critical self-reflection and by raising leadership consciousness.[11]

Miles highlights that leaders engaged in spiritual direction practiced storytelling as a way of reflecting and listening "from the heart." By sharing deep and meaningful accounts of their lives and how they perceive their experiences, they participated in authentic interactions that extended beyond surface-level communication. This depth of engagement increased their awareness of the cultural dynamics within the teams they led, enabling them to better understand, navigate, and respond to complexity in their leadership contexts. [12] Consequently, they were able to thrive in their roles. This insight suggests that leadership effectiveness is grounded less in external techniques and more in interior formation, a theme that is also reflected in the findings of this study.

Miles's work intersects with that of Barbara L. Peacock, particularly in her book *Soul Care in African American Practice*. In this work, Peacock examines influential figures in African American history who practiced what is now known as spiritual direction. As they engaged both the injustices within their communities and their own personal experiences of injustice, they

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[10] Bernadette Miles, *Strengthening Spirit—Releasing Potential: Spiritual Direction for Leadership and Organizational Development* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 9.

[11] Miles, *Strengthening Spirit—Releasing Potential,* 179.

[12] Miles, *Strengthening Spirit—Releasing Potential,* 179.

made meaning of these stories and transformed them into life-giving action in the world.[13] Through storytelling, these leaders not only contributed to social change but also empowered others to join the pursuit of justice—an aspiration shared by this study in its focus on vocational ministry that positively shapes the church and the denomination. These insights support this study's claim that pastoral resilience involves not only endurance but also the capacity to engage the world with clarity and purpose.

A compelling example of pastoral leadership that integrates storytelling, justice, and public witnesses is Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II. He embodies a form of ministry that is not confined to the local church, but extends to the public sphere. His prophetic voice reflects his ability to remain fully himself across contexts, integrating his identity as a pastor and an advocate for social change. Through preaching that connects scripture with lived experiences, he speaks truth to power, bearing witness in the public arena while exercising the authority of ordination in the service of justice. His leadership encourages pastors to broaden their understanding of ministry as fundamentally connected to the work of love, solidarity, liberation, and reconciliation in the world. [14]

The transformative and integrating skills of pastors, such as Barber, are developed when pastors willingly step beyond the places of comfort and full control. As Parker J Palmer writes

> Live encounters are unpredictable, challenging and risky. They carry no guarantees, so they are much less popular than those "inert collisions" in which we treat each other as objects. But live encounters offer us something that inert collisions lack: they are full of the vitality that makes life worth living, and they enhance our odds of doing worthy work.[15]

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[13] Barbara L. Peacock, *Soul Care in African American Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 5.

[14] Liz Theoharis, William J. Barber II, and Rick Lowery, *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

[15] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 111.

Palmer observed that effective pastors can do the work of making meaning in the world when they interact with it, seeking adventure and new opportunities to encounter it.

These insights reinforce the premise of this study: that pastoral resilience is not merely the capacity to endure difficulty but also the capacity to engage the world with clarity, courage, and purpose. The stories of pastors who fully embraced the itinerant system—regularly submitting themselves to relocation, uncertainty, and a spirit of adventure—are invaluable. Their reflections and processes of meaning-making offer important insights for others engaged in similar work, particularly those seeking to deepen their understanding of leadership and growth in dynamic and demanding contexts.

While these texts offer valuable insights into leadership and engagement, their primary focus remains on the effectiveness of ministerial identity and impact in the world. Far less attention is given to the question of sustainability—specifically, how pastors remain resilient while sustaining such engagement over decades. In addition, these works often stop short of critically identifying areas within ministry that require transformation or naming the systemic changes necessary to support the very outcomes they envision.

The Pastor at Church: Adaptive Leadership and Relational Complexity

Pastoral leadership involves navigating "uncharted waters" — complex relationships and ongoing changes. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky uses the example of activities on a dance floor to describe the work of a leader. They explain that leaders stay engaged in the dance of life as they enter the dance, but they also step away from the actual dance and move up to the

balcony to observe and direct.[16] Effective leaders know how to navigate their roles by staying engaged with various roles within their environment. Their key leadership skill is to be engaged in the work while, at the same time, reflecting, learning, adjusting, and reframing with experience to bring about change.[17] These leadership skills are what pastors consistently engage in on many levels, layering stories further.

It is inevitable that pastors face many challenges in their vocational life. In the United Methodist Church, their duties are outlined in the vows they make during ordination as they receive their credentials to represent the denomination, and one of the vows they make is to be itinerant, moving from place to place as deemed fit for the denominational leaders to assess and match the needs of the local churches to the talents of the pastors. These challenges increase, especially in the United Methodist Church, because of the number of transitions that take place, particularly when pastors are relocated every three to five years. Whether the move is initiated by the pastor, the congregation, or the leaders of the denomination, transitions are always difficult, no matter how much preparation is made in advance. Work is done specifically to discuss and plan transitions so that they are successful and smooth for churches and pastors; however, clergy transitions remain challenging.

As pastors transition into new ministry settings, they step into the unknown, as Susan Beaumont calls it, the liminal space.[18] As pastors engage in getting to know the people of the church, they collect stories that inform them of the reality of their setting -- the church's history, its finances, and its traditions -- all of which impact the church's identity. By listening, reflecting,

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[16] Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017).

[17] Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change*.

[18] Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

and analyzing these stories, pastors form a way forward for the church and how they can assimilate and enter the story of the congregation. The pastors also explore the community that surrounds the church, as it informs them of how the church fits into the story of their community. They not only face the unknown of their surroundings but also lead their church through the liminal space that is the changing world, and their church's vitality is in question in many cases.

They strive to care for their own health while caring for the health of their church. They engage in practices that helped them be fruitful in their ministry setting while leading their church to be fruitful as well. They modeled for the congregation what a healthy church looks like by teaching and modeling their own healthy spiritual practices, such as Robert Schnase's five practices of fruitful congregations: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. [19] These practices of vital churches gave me insight to what I can model as a pastor to for my congregation to help them discuss their own practices for their churches' health and for their overall mission that is aligned with God's calling for them

The pastor's function in the local church is to lead the church to know God, themselves, the world, and their part in God's plan.[20] In addition to guiding the church in their relationship with God, pastors are impacted by the local congregation's expectations, developed over time from their own culture, traditions, and history, which are projected onto the pastor. Thus, while the pastor faces pressure to maintain church vitality, they are also expected to build meaningful relationships with individuals, each with their own set of expectations for the pastor. All these factors create tension on the pastor to function in multiple roles —adapting, performing,

[19] Robert C. Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregation,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

[20] Schnase, *Five Practices, 128.*

knowing, caring, teaching, ordering, and administering—to ensure that their congregation is comforted, reassured, and satisfied.

Gil W. Stafford articulates pastoral roles that parallel spiritual direction: "steward of sacred safety, as holy listener, as the advocate of silence, and as wisdom teacher."[21] He explained that although pastors, like spiritual directors, have their own biases and strong beliefs with the authority to make them known due to their experience and expertise, they choose instead to provide everyone "sacred safety," a space where they will listen without judgment, will not direct, threaten, or push an agenda. Pastors lead with love and peace instead of wielding their power. This requires maturity and practice as they lead from a place of calm and safety of their own to provide that kind of space for others.[22]

Pastors are holy listeners who facilitate reflection in people who approach them for help. They have a deep desire to know the people they meet with genuine curiosity. They seek to understand others not through insincere, surface-level questions but through deep searches that go beneath what they observe at a glance.[23] They seek history and reasons for why people feel the way they do to find sources of their pain and suffering. They draw on the divine, seeking to intersect those stories with the hope and peace that come from each person's innate, God-given identity. Pastors learn by listening, and they lead with what they hear. They listen to their inner selves as deep listeners, seeking God to use their own experiences to interpret situations and to witness how scriptures come alive in them and around them.[24] They are always listening.[25]

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[21] Gil W. Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet: Stories and Reflections for Congregational Life,* (Lanham, MD: Alban Institute, 2014), 11.

[22] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 11.

[23] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 100.

[24] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 103.

[25] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 113.

Pastors are also advocates of silence, as it brings positive outcomes when inviting people to join in the practice of silence.

> When a leader and group faithfully practice silence, they will receive the gifts of (1) a deep empathy and thereby a stronger connection among those participating in the silence, (2) possible new discoveries or solutions to problems, and (3) a better chance to hear what the Spirit is saying to the community, thereby experiencing a union with God.[26]

Though silence sometimes makes people uncomfortable and makes pastors seem incompetent, over time, it will be powerful and become evidence of the power of the holy. Silence prepares people to hear what is next from pastors.[27] This gives way to the holy. making room for wisdom to be spoken and received.[28]

Finally, Stafford articulates that pastors, like spiritual directors, are teachers of wisdom developed over time through stories heard, collected, and told, and lessons learned.[29] He also refers to wisdom as a compassionate spirit that constantly teaches in gentle ways.[30] He encourages leaders to be aware that being a leader is risky but with the thrill of joy, and that leadership is all about relationships — with God, oneself, and others—as it is for spiritual direction.[31]

While these frameworks illuminate the complex role of the pastoral leader, they often focus overtly on the pastor's effectiveness and offer general suggestions for practical leadership skills to enhance their training in ministry. They focus more on pastoral or leadership characters

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[26] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*. 131.

[27] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 146.

[28] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 146.

[29] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 150-151.

[30] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*, 150-151.

[31] Stafford, *When Leadership and Spiritual Direction Meet*. 206-207.

or on the failure of leadership practices without studying patterns from those who can reflect in hindsight and interpret their experiences of resilience in navigating uncertainties and complexities.

Pastor, the Human Being: Trauma, Spiritual Formation, and Grounding Practices

Pastors engage in multiple settings where listening and meaning-making skills are essential. Healthy and effective clergy take time to understand themselves as individuals by reflecting on their own stories to sustain their identity as individuals. They reflect and analyze their stories as they do the work of discernment, learning to identify and articulate their call into vocational ministry, a life-long dedication to care for others and to see the world the way God sees it. Their call to vocational ministry is an enduring commitment to constantly holding and shaping the stories of others.

As pastors are prone to becoming enmeshed in others' identities and in their role as leaders in the community and the world, which causes them to sacrifice their own comfort and pleasure for the sake of caring for and being present for others, they are in danger of losing themselves. Their needs go unmet, their physical health is poor, their mental capacities are drained, and their ability to be whole and anchored is negatively impacted. With their constant need to expand their view of the world as they seek to meet others' needs and lead others to join them, pastors can lose themselves in the process. Their identity becomes closely tied to their ability to perform in their pastoral role, so that their human self becomes buried under the needs of others. When they suffer, it is too late, and those around them, especially those closer to them, suffer the consequences.

The literature on self-reflection, trauma, and spiritual formation highlights the importance of attending to the pastor's inner life through self-awareness to sustain self-identity. Cole Arthur Riley and Diana Butler Bass model reflective practices that integrate personal experience with theological meaning-making.

Riley exemplifies self-reflection as she observes the various areas of her life where strong emotions, such as fear, belonging, rest, joy, calling, and wonder arise. [32] Diana Butler Bass also does similar work of reflecting on her life in her book, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community,* where she recounts memorable moments in her faith journey, making meaning of where she has been and how they influenced her faith identity.[33] Both allude to the need for pastors to keep an account of their life path, in addition to their spiritual growth, not just their vocational ministry journeys, as they emphasize the critical skill of self-awareness as essential to sustaining vocational identity.

David G Benner states that mystics focus on experience, rather than theories, seeking truth in what many fail to appreciate. [34] He contends that all of life flows towards God, and that the work of opening oneself to the divine takes a lifetime of practice.[35] Benner emphasizes that experiential knowledge of self involves examining the many forms of oneself, such as the body, mind, soul, and spirit.[36]

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[32] Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories That Make Us,* (New York: Convergent, 2022).

[33] Diana Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).

[34] David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), xiv.

[35] Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation.*

[36] Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation.*

Similarly, Dwight H. Judy underscores the mystical dimension of Jesus' ministry in the scriptures, emphasizing the vital role of spiritual practices in cultivating a deeper awareness of God's presence alongside intentional self-awareness. [37] Furthermore, Wendy J. Miller's work, *Jesus Our Spiritual Director: A Pilgrimage Through the Gospels*, highlights how these practices —modeled in the life and ministry of Jesus —form a path towards attentiveness to God's presence in everyday life.[38]

However, Benner points to the importance of being in community and journeying with others in finding oneness in the self. [39] He also strongly advocates for spiritual direction, spiritual friends, and small groups, highlighting the benefits of being accompanied by others in intentional groups focused on genuine sharing, spiritual growth, and the journey toward oneness with God.[40]

Like Benner, Daniel L. Preschtel argues that seeking meaningful companionship brings the gift of hope and peace. These sources highlight the importance of pastors focusing on their own well-being by cultivating a healthy sense of self that extends beyond their professional responsibilities in ministry, across diverse settings, and through various practices.

However, trauma literature brings another level of awareness to this study, as it undergirds the complexity brought on by experiences of crisis that impact the ability for reflection and spiritual formation. Shelly Rambo asserts in her work with trauma and theology that "Trauma is the suffering that does not go away. The study of trauma is the study of what

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[37] Dwight H. Judy, *Quest for the Mystical Christ: Awakening the Heart of Faith,* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2003).

[38] Wendy J. Miller, *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director*: A Pilgrimage *Through the Gospels*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2004).

[39] Miller, *Jesus, Our Spiritual Director*: *A Pilgrimage Through the Gospels*.

[40] David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

remains after the storm."[41] She points out that trauma is what lingers after the experience of pain and is intrusive in individuals' and communities' regular functions.[42] She also discusses the intentionality and time required for reflection on what trauma leaves people with and the important skills and kinds of work needed to live through it.[43] Likewise, Jennifer Baldwin insists on the necessity of the practice of theology informed by trauma and how to do theology with those experiences of crisis.[44] Baldwin suggests that the Reformation era within the Christian faith arose from critical thinking, analysis, and discussion of what is happening in people's lives, such as trauma, and how, through these deep conversations, there was an emergence of maturity.[45] She affirms that mindful work with trauma strengthens both one's faith and communities.[46] She also points out that attention to the experiences of difficulty and even trauma is necessary when considering how Christianity and the church community are to look at God. Their work provides ways to articulate aspects of trauma while highlighting the need for work on the experience of trauma as individuals and as a community within the atmosphere of love and care.

Finally, the literature on resilience and self-care from authors such as Tod E. Bolsinger and April Yamasaki offers practical ways to build resilience and guides reflection to facilitate healing and spiritual growth. Bolsinger aims to use self-awareness in reflection during challenging times as a catalyst for spiritual and personal growth, claiming that specific practices build resilience. He argues that hardship can deepen faith in God and develop skills to combat

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[41] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining,* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

[42] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma, 2*.

[43] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma, 2*.

[44] Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma,* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

[45] Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma.*

[46] Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma.*

other crises by working on different areas of their lives through practices grounded in scripture.[47] In contrast, Yamasaki suggests a more passive approach to building resilience and personal growth by advocating for and appreciating the gift of pausing, the work of slowing down, and the practice of intentional stopping in life as a way to be mindful of one's surroundings, for self-care, and for self-awareness.[48]

William Bridges focuses on the space "in between", the different transitions that happen in life, such as relationships, work life, and life stages, and discusses what can be learned from those experiences.[49] He describes the thought processes in human beings as they experience change and provides reflection questions that guide people through specific changes.[50] He focuses on the positive aspects of change and what can be hopeful and impactful in the journey toward the next steps in life's shifts.[51]

Other literature that built a framework for this study focused on spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and scriptural study, aimed at deepening prayer life and diversifying practices that foster spiritual growth. Gary Hansen's *Kneeling with Giants: Learning to Pray with History's Best Teacher* provides an in-depth look at the prayer lives of history's religious figures, such as St. Benedict, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, as well as the traditions of the Puritans and their representative prayer techniques and the foundations of their prayer journeys.[52] And specific to the United Methodist context, the *Methodist Book of Daily Prayers* provides prayers for every

[47] Tod E. Bolsinger, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders are Formed in the Crucible of Change*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

[48] April Yamasaki, *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal*, (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013).

[49] William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, (New York: Hachette Go Books, 2019).

[50] Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*.

[51] Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*.

[52] Gary Neal Hansen, *Kneeling with Giants* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

season of the church calendar that not only can be used in the church but also in the pastor's own prayer life. This prayer book aims to guide the practice of prayer that helps ground the reader in the Methodist church context.[53]

This collection of literature shifts attention away from the discomfort of challenging experiences and takes a practical approach to self-care, building skills for resilience and spiritual growth. Collectively, these sources suggest that resilience involves not only coping but also sustained engagement with ongoing challenges. At the same time, they tend to emphasize particular aspects of this process—offering language to name the experience, encouraging mindfulness and awareness, or prescribing coping strategies through spiritual disciplines with guidance on what to do and what to avoid.

This study's framework focuses on spiritual practices that support participants' spiritual grounding, spiritual growth, and resilience, derived from their experiences. However, it also seeks to study patterns to identify problems, gaps, and areas for improvement where shifts are necessary in the broader context of the church—its processes and systems that may be involved in creating similar challenges.

[53] Matt Miofsky, *The Methodist Book of Daily Prayer,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023).

Chapter 3

Biblical and Theological Framework

Understanding scripture is inherently tied to hermeneutics, the practice of interpreting the text in light of one's personal experiences. These experiences are shaped by various factors, including geographical location, socioeconomic background, family dynamics, and education. Hermeneutics involves examining scripture alongside these life circumstances, while also considering the historical context of the text itself. To fully grasp the meaning of scripture, one must engage with it not only as a sacred text but also as a message from the author, viewed through the lens of one's own life and worldview. Only then does the text become relevant, as it becomes deeply personal and applicable to the reader's context. The more one reflects on and studies the scripture, the more profound and life-giving its messages become.

The Bible, with its diverse literary styles, language nuances, and symbolic imagery, consistently reveals God through multiple scriptural pathways. The Bible’s layers of meaning, and its various translations throughout history make it challenging to fully capture the author's original intent. Therefore, engaging in hermeneutics allows one to explore the text through different frameworks, turning reflection into a lifelong, enriching pursuit. Through this process, the scriptures come alive, offering fresh insights and enabling readers to find meaning and inspiration in their own experiences.

Subsequently, the identity of clergy originates from a perceived divine calling—a distinct summoning by the Creator that imparts a sense of higher purpose beyond routine daily responsibilities. Consequently, clergy members derive their identity not from their specific actions, but from the overarching purpose for which they are called. Recognizing, understanding, and responding to a call to ministry involves spiritual formation guided by experienced mentors.

This process relies on mentor–mentee relationships, the passing on of wisdom, building trust, and preparing individuals for their calling. Mentoring is vital for a fruitful ministry, offering reflection, accountability, and encouraging deeper inquiry amid challenges. Particular mentoring relationships selected from the three different sections of the Bible— the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the Epistles— created a framework to understand a true formative relationship that is grounded in spiritual guidance that enhances one's purpose, fosters well-being, and facilitates spiritual and personal growth. Those relationships are between Ruth and Naomi, the Apostle Paul and Timothy, and Jesus and his disciples.

Studying these mentoring relationships through a practical theology lens highlights how God's activity is woven throughout their stories. This approach reveals the divine narrative within personal experiences, transforming mentoring into a partnership with God's ongoing work in the world.

Naomi and Ruth (Book of Ruth)

The Book of Ruth is a beautiful story with two women at the center of the narrative, a rare occurrence in the Bible. Because these are rare occasions, when these stories appear, the meanings are profound and heartwarming. The story of Ruth and Naomi captures the loving relationship between two grieving women: a mother who loses two sons and her husband in untimely deaths and her daughter-in-law, a widowed immigrant in her mother-in-law's homeland.

The historical and geographical context of Ruth is extensive, ranging from the specific timeline to the significance of its location, Bethlehem. It is also notable that it is the narrative that eventually leads to the birth of Jesse, the father of King David, and the family line of Jesus, who was later born in the location of this story.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary mentions two major themes derived from this story: redemption and inner/outer circles.[1]

In the beginning of this book, Naomi's husband Elimelech, is at the center of the story as everything revolves around him and everything belongs to him, [2] "his two sons and his wife named Naomi." (Ruth 1:2, CEB). While he was alive, even though Naomi gave birth to her sons, the sons belonged to her husband. However, Naomi, who was outside the story, is placed at the center following her husband's untimely death.[3] "Then only she was left, along with her two sons," (Ruth 1:3, CEB) and "both of the sons, Mahlon and Chilion, also died. Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband." (Ruth 1:5, CEB). The language of these scriptures emphasizes the theme, stating that she even has possessions: her husband, her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, and as the story unfolds, Ruth's son.

As Naomi loses all that is precious to her, causing extreme grief, her laments even causes her to change her name from Naomi, meaning "pleasant" to Mara, meaning "bitter."[4] After Naomi urges Ruth twice to return to her own mother, Ruth instead commits herself to staying with Naomi as she journeys back to her homeland. In choosing this path, Ruth also turns to worship Naomi's God, leaving behind her own. From there, they become two grieving and traumatized women, leaning on each other. Moreover, Ruth submits to Naomi, taking all directions from her mother-in-law and constantly blessing her. Here, they become mentor and mentee —Naomi with more experience and wisdom because she knew more about the

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[1] Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 892–93.

[2] Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," 901.

[3] Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," 901.

[4] Bible Gateway, "Ruth 1 (CEB)," 2026, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ruth%201&version=CEB.

experience of grief, having lost three of her main support systems. Naomi also takes Ruth into her homeland, where she knows the people and places. Naomi directs Ruth step by step while teaching her the laws of gleaning the harvest and how to present herself to Boaz. And as Naomi instructs Ruth on what to do, Naomi keeps Ruth accountable and follows up on how she did.

At the end of the story, there is redemption as Boaz takes Ruth as his wife, providing her with security for the rest of her life, which was taken from her with her first husband's death. However, greater redemption comes to Naomi as Ruth hands her son, Obed, to Naomi. "Naomi took the child and held him to her breast; she became his guardian. The neighborhood women gave him a name, saying, A son has been born to Naomi." (Ruth 4:16–17, CEB). The fruit of all the pain she endured and receiving Ruth under her wings turned into the story of ultimate redemption that comes through Jesus, the savior of the world, through her family line.

The relationship between Naomi and Ruth displays a framework of mutual mentorship, understood not as a one-directional exchange of guidance, but as reciprocal processes of formation, care, and shared flourishing in which they are simultaneously the givers and receivers within the mentoring process.

Within this framework, mentorship is characterized by reciprocal provision, in which each individual contributes to the well-being and future of the other. Naomi offers Ruth stability, belonging, and strategic guidance for long-term security, while Ruth provides Naomi with sustenance through her labor and, ultimately, participates in restoring Naomi's familial lineage and social standing. The "fruit" of this relationship—material, relational, and generational—is not possessed individually but is shared mutually, such that the flourishing of one becomes the fulfillment of the other.

A central component of this framework is the concept of shared fruitfulness, in which the outcomes of mentorship are mutually experienced. The narrative reflects a pattern of redemptive joy, woman finds meaning and restoration through the other's well-being. Ruth's joy is expressed in Naomi's redemption and renewed role within the community, while Naomi's joy is realized through Ruth's security and future established through her relationship with Boaz. Therefore, mentoring is reframed as a relational process in which joy, healing, and restoration are experienced.

Additionally, this framework emphasizes faithful presence in the midst of suffering as a necessary condition for mutual mentorship. Naomi and Ruth demonstrated a strong commitment to each other through shared experiences of grief, displacement, and uncertainty. This enduring relational presence establishes the trust required for reciprocal exchanges and deep relational transformations.

The findings of this study display this framework through the experiences of participating clergy. Participants embodied mutual mentorship through the intentional sharing of personal stories, including lessons learned, experiences of joy, and accounts of pain and vocational trauma. By offering these narratives, participants engage in a form of generative investment, contributing to the development and well-being of current and future clergy. Notably, this generativity persists even in retirement, reflecting an enduring commitment to the flourishing of the church.

Despite experiencing suffering and institutional harm, the participants in this study expressed a sustained love for the church while holding onto hope. Their willingness to contribute the "fruit" of their lived experience—particularly in the form of wisdom forged through hardship—demonstrates that mutual mentorship extends beyond active vocational roles and into broader communal and generational contexts.

In summary, the mutual mentorship framework is strongly displayed in the relationship between Naomi and Ruth, displaying reciprocal provision, shared fruitfulness, faithful presence, and generative investment. The ultimate outcome of such relationships is not solely individual development but the cultivation of communal flourishing, sustained hope, and redemptive possibility across generations.

Paul and Timothy (1 Timothy 6:11-14)

Timothy had grown up in the faith community Apostle Paul founded as he considered young Timothy "my true son in the faith." (1 Tim 1:2, CEB) Warren W. Wiersbe, in *The Bible Exposition Commentary* clarifies that the word "genuine" is a more accurate word here than "true."[5] Timothy, alongside Titus, was one of his special assistants in his work of building up the church. And Timothy was sent to the most difficult ministry settings. One of those places was Ephesus, a town that was known for idol worship, socio-religious pressures, and community conflict.[6] The Bible Exposition Commentary speculated that the challenges in the Ephesus church community was so great that Timothy even gave up at one point, but he was sent back with additional instructions and encouragement from Paul. [7]

Much of 1 Timothy was Paul instructing Timothy on what to do and what not to do as a leader. However, in this short section, Paul changed the direction of instructions — "But as for you, man of God." (1 Tim. 6:11, CEB), charging him to care for himself. It was not about what

[5] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1989), 210.

[6] Wiersbe*, The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 210.

[7] Wiersbe*, The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 210.

he should do in and for the church; this was for Timothy as the leader and pastor. He instructed Timothy to run away, fight, pursue, grab hold of, and obey, all for his own sake.

He told Timothy to flee from all that drives people to ungodliness, negativity, and things that cause jealousy as it takes him away from God and faithful living.[8] He was alluding to what he wrote in 1Tim. 4:3-10: false teachings, materialism, and love of money—all that was infesting their community at the time. He also encouraged Timothy to "pursue," or more accurately follow or chase after, what is good: love, practice patience, endurance, gentleness, and faithfulness.[9] These are the spiritual practices that would build him up as a person of faith, one that comes from a strong trust in God and a strong connection with God — a resilient leader. Then Paul instructs Timothy to "obey the order" (1 Tim 6:14, CEB) which he calls to mind his charge as the leader in the church mentioned in 1Tim 4:11, to "Command and teach these things."[10] Then Paul concluded that section of the letter encouraging him to keep up this work in God until the "appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Tim 6:14, CEB). The word "appear" is the Greek word for "epiphany," a glorious manifesting. Paul's instruction for Timothy was to keep working hard until he sees the manifestation of Christ, when Jesus shows up. Paul's time, though there were myths about when Christ's second coming would be, it was not a sure time of when. Paul was telling Timothy to keep faithful daily in doing these things, to keep abiding in God every day.[11]

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[8] Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 210.

[9] Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 210.

[10] Joel Dorman, "The Power of a Mentor (1 Timothy 4:13–14)," Life Meets Theology, August 29, 2018, https://lifemeetstheology.com/2018/08/29/the-power-of-a-mentor-1-timothy-413-14/.

[11] Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 236.

Paul challenged Timothy with the task of the future but inspired him with the memories of the past by reminding him of his baptism and his calling as Paul put his hands on him to anoint him for ministry. [12] And Paul reminded Timothy that he, himself made the same confession, like Jesus.[13] Timothy was not alone in ministry: He had his mentors, his colleagues, and the presence and the power of Christ.

Paul's mentoring can be understood as character formation under pressure—flee, pursue, fight, take hold, and remain faithful. In this study, Paul's mentoring voice is echoed in the voices of the participants. As they step away from ministries to which they have devoted their lives, they entrust these communities to a new generation of leaders, colleagues, and mentees. They offer wisdom that was not always fully expressed in their earlier reflections and storytelling. In this way, their words resonate with Paul's letter to Timothy, speaking to all who read this study through their deep love for the church and their hopes for its future vitality.

Jesus and Disciples (John 15:1-11)

There is no way to study the theme of mentorship in the Bible without turning to Jesus' instructions for his disciples in ministry. Like God's declaration to Moses, Jesus' seven I AM statements point to Jesus' connectedness to God. The Bible Exposition Commentary claims that out of the seven, John 15:1-11, "I am the vine" statement, is the clearest and most detailed of the other six.[14] This saying of Jesus is the most well known in the Christian community and is often referred to when talking about the need to be connected with God.

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[12] Warren W. Wiersbe*, The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 236.

[13] Warren W. Wiersbe*, The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 236.

[14] Robert H. Mounce, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Luke–Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2007), 573.

Several contextual details are significant. Jesus' audience would have been familiar with vineyard imagery, and the vine metaphor already carried weight in the Hebrew Scriptures—often as a negative symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness and God's judgment. [15] Against this backdrop, Jesus' claim to be the "true vine" would have been striking and theologically loaded.

The language of pruning in John 15:2 invites careful interpretation. Robert H. Mounce, in The Bible Exposition Commentary, references two kinds of pruning practiced in ancient times.[16]

> In early spring (February or March) the dead wood unable to bear fruit was cut away. Later, when the blossoms had become ripening grapes (August), the little shoots that had appeared were cut away so that the main fruit bearing branches would receive all the nourishment. There is an interesting play on words in v.2 between *airei* (cuts off) and *kathairei* ("trims clean", "prune", especially since *katharoi* (clean) is used in the following verse.

For this reason, Mounce mentioned that it might not be plausible to think that those who are not bearing fruit will totally be cut off; rather, it should be translated as "to make clean."[17]

> Branches are pruned so they will become more fruitful. God's "pruning" is his gracious way of directing the flow of spiritual energy in order that his plans for our lives will be realized. While pruning is painful, it serves the necessary purpose of removing those branches that would otherwise absorb our time and energy in unproductive pursuits. [18]

At this point, it is crucial to exercise caution in interpretation. This study does not intend to resolve the ongoing debate about whether the passage emphasizes judgment and exclusion or centers on development and refinement. Both viewpoints are evident in the text and its interpretative history. Nonetheless, this analysis tends to regard pruning as, at least in part, a developmental process—one that redirects and refines rather than solely excludes.

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[15] Mounce, *The Bible Exposition Commentary,* 573.

[16] Mounce, *The Bible Exposition Commentary,* 573.

[17] Mounce, *The Bible Exposition Commentary,* 574.

[18] Mounce, *The Bible Exposition Commentary,* 574

Within these boundaries, pruning can be more precisely seen as a metaphor for redirecting, refining, and deepening commitment. As Jesus says, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you," (John 15:3, NIV), suggesting that this "cleansing" is tied to relationship and ongoing formation. Similarly, John 15:5 emphasizes that fruit-bearing is not a reward for effort, but the natural outcome of remaining connected: "If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

Furthermore, Jesus warned, "If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (John 15:6, NIV). The Bible Exposition Commentary contends that, as it is usually understood, Jesus is the stem that holds and lets go of the branch. By contrast, the branch is holding on to the vine/stem, who is Jesus.[19] This alludes to the fact that when the branch remains connected to the vine, the branch cannot help but to bloom and bear fruit. It is not the reward for clinging but the outcome of being connected. If the branch falls, it withers and is then picked up and thrown into the fire. It is not that even if it is connected to the branch, it will be removed. It is the prerogative of the branch to stay and cling, where it will then have no choice but to bloom and produce fruit.

This leads to a clearer conclusion for this study. The primary claim is not that suffering itself produces resilience or that hardship is inherently formative. Rather, resilience is formed through sustained abiding in Christ. Within that relationship, experiences of disruption or challenge may, over time, become occasions for reorientation, refinement, and deeper dependence—but only when held within a framework of care, community, and spiritual practice.

In the context of this study, this reading sheds light on the lives of the retired clergy. Their resilience is not simply the product of enduring difficulty, but of remaining grounded in Christ

[19] Mounce*, The Bible Exposition Commentary,* 575.

through spiritual practices over time. As they transition from ministries into which they have poured their lives, they entrust their communities to a new generation, offering wisdom that reflects years of abiding. Their witness suggests that fruitfulness in ministry is not a reward for perseverance alone, but an organic outcome of sustained connection to the vine.

Thus, the mentoring thread becomes clear: like Jesus' formation of his disciples, and echoing the call of Paul the Apostle to Timothy, resilience is cultivated not merely through pressure, but through a life continually rooted in Christ.

Chapter 4

Methodology

The research method that allows for a deep focus on the invaluable stories of people is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative research method is concerned with exploring meanings that come from one's complex experiences.[1] In this study, the central phenomenon being examined is the lived experience of pastoral resilience, specifically how retired clergy make meaning of sustaining ministry over time through their practice of spiritual disciplines. This method considers the fact that each person is, "embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns"[2] and aims to dig deeper beyond the surface level observations and initial impression of life events.

IPA research also attempts to understand each person and their interconnectedness within themselves, what they see, what they feel, their own analysis and reflection, making meaning of what is happening around them.[3] This study intentionally uses IPA rather than narrative inquiry or general qualitative analysis because its aim is not only to present the stories of the participants but to interpret how they understand and make sense of their experiences in ministry —their successes, their challenges, and their resilience. Experts of the IPA method also summarizes the work in this way:

> IPA is committed to the detailed examination of the particular case. It wants to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them…IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail. Immediate claims

[1] Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, Theory, Method and Research, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2022), 1.

[2] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 16.

[3] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 17.

> are therefore bounded by the group studied but an extension can be considered through theoretical generalizability, where the reader of the report is able to assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge.[4]

In this particular study, the participants are a distinct but also diverse subset of individuals within a shared system and a set of rules who, within a smaller but varied geographical area, performed similar daily functions through an overlapping amount of time. An in-depth review of their experiences will serve to deepen the collective understanding of their broader professional group.

The IPA method also emphasizes the importances of digging deep into a person's experience and their reflection about those experiences, observing and noticing patterns and themes in their own context. The collected data is then analyzed again for additional meaning and significance, searching for the rich source of ideas that come from their lived experiences that will influence change in the world.[5] This reflects the double hermeneutics at the center of IPA. The participants interpret their own experience of ministry and resilience, and the researcher interprets again through careful analysis, seeking patterns, particularities, and exceptions. In this study, this process develops as the participants describe their understanding of their calling, their own analysis of the challenges they experienced, and what sustained them while the researcher seeks meaning in how all the stories intersect.

Experts of IPA also highlight that there is "the major theoretical underpinning of IPA that comes from hermeneutics—the theory of interpretation—used in the work of interpreting biblical text."[6] Hermeneutics — the work of bringing the original meaning of a text into meaningful

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[4] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

[5] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 7.

[6] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 17.

conversation with present-day life — is practiced in the analysis of this method for studying people of God's calling, to intersect life events and the overarching meaning from God, the author of all creation, for a greater understanding of life for the betterment of the world at large.

The Questions

In order to facilitate this qualitative research, several questions were thoughtfully designed to elicit rich, reflective account of each participant's ministry journey. These questions encouraged them to engage openly and share the meaning they made of their experiences throughout their vocational lives. The central question that aligned with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was:

- How do retired clergy make meaning of the spiritual practices that sustained resilience throughout their ministry?

This qualitative research primarily aimed to explore the "central phenomenon," and its supporting questions were as follows:What are the spiritual practices that are derived from the stories of retired clergy and how do they allude to them and interpret them as being sustaining?

- What spiritual foundations were essential to resilience, endurance, and inner peace and how do they interpret their significance in their lives?
- In what ways do clergy understand the connection between their spiritual practices and their ability to have engaged in ministry over time?

In the effort to collect context and to help them recall their ministry experience, these questions were used to initiate their reflection.

- Tell me a bit about yourself. How do you describe yourself?
- Please tell me a bit about your call story and how you came to pursue and commit to the life of ordained ministry.
- How was your ordination process like? What skills, in particular, spiritual practices did you learn?
- Please tell me a bit about your ministry settings, the places you have served, your roles in them, and any significant memories about each of them.

The intent of these questions was two-fold: to understand the background of their story to establish a framework for interpreting their experiences and to help the participant travel back to those places and times of their ministry. This effort was an implicit invitation to relive those major incidents that would help them think deeply about their experiences and evoke additional meaning as they look in hindsight.

The last half of the interview was arranged to ask specific questions pertaining to significant past events in ministry that impacted them and to reflect on the ways they exhibited resilience. These questions directed their reflection, not on the details of the incidents but to extract details of specific skills and practices that grounded them which indirectly initiated conversation that would address the three overall goals of this study. Those questions were:

- What are some of your most memorable experiences in ministry where you felt most connected to God? What do you attribute this experience to?

- Tell me a bit about the ministry times and the difficult, chaotic ministry times and how they shaped you as a pastor and as a person. What spiritual practices helped you stay connected to the divine?
- Tell me about your intentional times away from ministry. Did you use Sabbaticals and renewal leaves? What did you do in them? Which of them were memorable and which were not helpful?
- Did you utilize counseling, therapy, ministry coaching, and/or spiritual direction— group or one-on-one?

The interview closed on a positive and encouraging note, addressing the participants' achievements and not simply their regrets. They were also encouraged to offer parting words of wisdom to current and future clergy and to give an update to how their life-long experience of ministry has informed their post-retirement activities. The prompts used were:

- Tell me about your experiences of successes in ministry and what you attributed to them.
- Tell me about your experience of failures or regrets in ministry and what you learned from them.
- What are some of the most useful ways to be connected to God that you used often?
- What spiritual practices would you highly recommend current and future clergy to practice regularly? What do you wish you knew about spiritual practices?
- What spiritual disciplines do you continue to practice or have taken on newly in retirement?
- What have you been engaged in beyond your retirement?

Matters Concerning the Participants

The inspiration to form a study that centered on the stories of retired clergy stemmed from my cultural upbringing of respecting and valuing the wisdom of the seasoned and the elderly as well as the absence of their voices in my recent research about church data. It was startling to find the lack of publications and data about retired clergy and their experiences. I also observed in my clergy context in northern Illinois that in rare occasions retired clergy were invited as honorable guest at special celebration while a few were present in large gatherings of colleagues and in conference committees as members at large. And while biographies were written about them by colleagues and their family members, and they wrote autobiographies and other inspirational articles, there was a noticeable void of any literature that compiled the stories and their experiences.

The few instances where retired clergy and their experiences are mentioned are in reports drawn from surveys to assess the state of pastors in the United States. The two major organizations that conduct dynamic surveys of religious matters are Lifeway Resource and Barna Group who recently published reports that highlighted the data that tells the story of pastors who contemplate leaving ministry and the reasons for the struggle. They also focused their survey on how soon these pastors start contemplating their possible exit from ministry. One resource celebrated that those who were leaving ministry within their first year was a very low number (1%).[7] They then conclude their studies, speculating about why these pastors struggle yet remain but offering no solid answers to the question. They simply suggest fostering a prayerful life,

[7] Earls, Aaron. 2025. "Pastors Remain Committed to the Pulpit - Lifeway Research." Lifeway Research. May 29, 2025. https://research.lifeway.com/2025/05/29/pastors-remain-committed-to-the-pulpit/.

taking regular breaks like vacations, renewal leaves, and sabbatical, and reading their full report that comes with the registration to participate in the resilience training they offer for a fee.[8]

Other insightful articles that involved clergy who have been in ministry for a significant amount of time are on the study of the number of years a pastor should be tenured in a congregation to be most effective and beneficial for the pastor and the church[9] and the fascinating study done on pastors of megachurches who serve in one congregation for decades and are second career pastors with long employment history outside of the church before answering their call to ministry.[10] While these reports offered intriguing and vital insights into the experiences of those struggling or exiting the ministry, they overlooked the experiences of resilient clergy who have endured and survived until retirement. Furthermore, there was a distinct lack of research focused on those who have never considered leaving their roles and their calling for ministry.

Addressing the limited research on resilient clergy who withstood the test of time, this study investigates the stories and specific spiritual practices of long-tenured pastors — twenty-five years or more—to identify the factors that sustained their longevity and effective ministry amidst adversity.

The interview for this study was designed to incorporate the diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and geographical settings—rural, urban, and suburban—that

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[8] Barna Group. 2026. "Pastors Quitting Ministry: New Barna Data Shows a Shift." Barna Group. January 27, 2026. https://www.barna.com/trends/pastors-quitting-ministry-barna-data/.

[9] Rainer, Thom S. 2014. "The Dangerous Third Year of Pastoral Tenure." *Church Answers*. June 18, 2014. https://churchanswers.com/blog/dangerous-third-year-pastoral-tenure/.

[10] Earls, Aaron. 2024. "Most Pastors Have Limited Non-Ministry Work Experience - *Lifeway Research*." Lifeway Research. August 6, 2024. https://research.lifeway.com/2024/08/06/most-pastors-have-limited-non-ministry-work-experience/.

define retired clergy in the northern Illinois area. This initiative aims to spark a movement, shining a light on the stories of these dedicated leaders to ensure their lifelong contributions help shape the future vitality of the Church they continue to love.

The intent for a limited number of participants was in the effort to develop a much richer and detailed attention to the smaller sample. The intent for eight study participants was also derived from studying the ethnic and cultural demographics as well the gender and sexual orientation diversity of the United Methodist clergy in northern Illinois and the various regional areas that are sectioned by the denomination's make up which sufficiently represented each group of demographics of the clergy in this region. The small sample size falls within the accepted range for IPA studies and supports depth of analysis required by this methodology. All participants shared a common context within the United Methodist church in northern Illinois, providing a level of homogeneity essential for meaningful comparison. At the same time, they represented diversity of backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, allowing for the exploration of both shared experiences and district perspectives.

In the effort to secure eight candidates that adequately represent the s diversity of The United Methodist churches and the clergy in the northern Illinois area, I reached out to my network of colleagues for input to form a list of diverse retired clergy who served more than twenty-five years. Several candidates from the list were contacted via email and phone with careful attention paid to ensuring diversity in gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as well as their roles and location of the churches they served.

After a brief conversation with each candidate about the details of this study, their approval to participate was received through a signed consent form that outlined the process and the promise of confidentiality (included in the appendix). Then the ninety-minute interview was

scheduled to take place either virtually or in-person. This effort secured seven candidates for the study.

The Interview Sessions

A total of seven 90-minute interviews were conducted: six via Zoom and one in person. Each session opened with a brief, unrecorded conversation that included greetings and personal updates. I then reminded the participant that the interview would be recorded, guaranteed strict confidentiality for all specific names mentioned, and advised them that, even though I can be trusted, to use their own discretion when sharing sensitive information. I also reminded them that they were welcome to take breaks if needed, which a few of the participants took for refreshments. Undivided attention was mutual in every session.

As the recording was initiated, I thanked them for participating in the study and asked them for a brief description about who they are followed by initiating their long monologue of recalling their life long ministry highlighting: their call into ministry, seminary education, ministry settings, the roles they played and memorable characteristics of those settings. (Guiding questions are found in “the question” section of this chapter.)

As they recounted these details about their journey chronologically, they openly revealed specific circumstances surrounding those placements. While such transparency was unexpected, these details provided an invaluable framework of understanding their perception and gave more insight to certain incidents they found to be memorable and pivotal in shaping their identity. The interview became self-guided as the participant naturally answered most of the questions prepared through their monologue, recounting vivid details of their various ministry roles,

challenges they faced, how they were resolved, and their reflection about them in hindsight. They also went on to share how those experiences impacted their future ministry and how they strengthened their foundation and resilience without direct prompting.

Throughout the interview, there was a natural progression and ebbs and flows that the participants controlled. There were moments of laughter, silence in contemplation, and deeper reflection of each ministry setting and experiences. They rewound and fast-forwarded through the timeline of their lives freely, connecting their milestones of ministry to moments in their childhood and even their birth stories to witness to God's unwavering provision across their entire lives.

As they wound down their monologue, I used the prepared questions to invite the participants to deepen reflections and bring clarity where it was needed from their sharing. Finally, they were given the opportunity to share additional insight about resilience as a pastor and other pieces of advice for current and future clergy pertaining to fostering strong resilience.

After stopping the recording, I expressed my gratitude for their participation and trust and promised to share the completed study. Each participant also took time to share a word of encouragement to me for my ministry journey and for the completion of the study with their expression of gratitude for the opportunity to share their story. All the participants acknowledged that this was their first experience of sharing an in-depth account of their ministry journey and that this study was a worthwhile endeavor that would benefit other retirees and the denomination. They also expressed a sense of assurance, knowing that their life-long ministry and their story would leave a lasting legacy.

Steps of Organizing and Interpreting Data

After the interviews were recorded, each recording was viewed multiple times with careful attention. This process included frequent pauses and rewinds so that nothing significant would be missed. As I listened, I created two kinds of notes. One was a chronological list of key events in each participant's life and ministry. The second note focused on the spiritual practices they named, along with how they described those practices, the situation I which they used them, and what those practices meant to them.

At first, the list of practices was grouped into four general categories: before vocational ministry, in ministry, after retirement, and regrets. These groupings helped organize the data, but they were not the final steps of analysis. They then served as a starting point for deeper reflection. I then returned to the interviews, listening to how the participants experienced those spiritual disciplines and their significant reflections on them, especially in moments of transition, challenges, and learning.

Following the study methodology, IPA, I worked through each participant's story, looking for patterns within each of the participants' stories. This was intended for each participant's story to make sense on its own. From there, I began identifying themes that emerged within each case, focusing on how they each made sense of their experiences and how their spiritual practices shaped their resilience. As themes began to emerge, I made connections, forming broader themes that reflected obvious patterns within each story, and then studied across the participants' stories.

Chapter 5 was dedicated to recording chronological summaries for each participant to honor their stories, while they provided context and background for the analyzed data. The

groupings and charts in Appendix 3 display the initial thought processes for recording, grouping, and connecting the collected data across participants to identify emerging themes.

Unforeseen Challenges and New Discovery

In the process of preparation and conducting the interviews, there were unforeseen challenges and discoveries that are worth noting.

During this research, I encountered unexpected personal challenges related to my ethnicity and position within the context I shared with the participants. As a young adult East Asian clergywoman serving in the same region this study investigates, I found it essential to place special emphasis on confidentiality to preserve collegiality among peers. My insider status occasionally offered advantages, such as eliminating the need for extensive explanations regarding the clergy credentialing process, theological education, or specific details about the geographic or regional context, since these were mutually understood by both myself and the participants. Therefore, it was important to mention the signed study covenant, which outlined confidentiality, the recording's storage (it will only be stored on my computer), and the deletion of specific details such as places, names, and dates.

However, this familiarity also required careful navigation. Particular circumstances and details involving specific individuals and locations demanded an added level of sensitivity and mindfulness in both reporting and discussion. To maintain trust and protect the integrity of relationships within the clergy community, it was necessary to exercise discretion by censoring or omitting elements that could compromise confidentiality.

Additionally, the age gap between the participants and me challenged my cultural assumptions, requiring mindfulness to manage discomfort and stay confident despite being younger. This challenge was more noticeable during interview sessions with those of Asian descent, and I speculate that the participant was also mindful of their own cultural assumptions about power dynamics within Asian norms. I overcame this challenge by adopting a mindful approach for each interview, showing curiosity and humility as the interviewer for all the interviews.

In the process of securing candidates for the study, an unexpected issue occurred. While it was easier to secure the White male and White female candidates, enlisting the White female lesbian, representing the queer clergy group, was difficult because of a very short list of possible interviewees. Similarly, it was easier to add the Black male and Black female candidates to the study but challenging to obtain candidates who represented the Asian clergy. The clergy of Asian heritage is represented by an East Asian female and a Southeast Asian male.

Another significant issue in this study that must be acknowledged is the absence of a candidate who represents the Hispanic clergy and congregations in the United Methodist Church in northern Illinois. Though considerable effort was made in cooperation with the representative of the Hispanic Caucus of the United Methodist Church, I was unable to secure a Hispanic clergy candidate who had served for twenty-five years or more. Among the couple that existed, one declined to participate and the other had passed away recently.

The struggle to recruit a pool of candidates for this study that accurately reflects the current diversity of pastors and churches in northern Illinois underscores a need for further exploration that would benefit the growth of The United Methodist presence in the area. Those concerns that can be addressed in further studies are as follows:

- There is a richness of diversity, specifically among the clergy and congregations of Asian descent in northern Illinois. Though there are several that include East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian United Methodist Churches and pastors, other Asian communities that make up parts of northern Illinois' demographics are underrepresented or have no connections to the life-giving ministry within United Methodist communities.
- There is a lack of Latinx United Methodist clergy in the northern Illinois area, though the need is great. There is also a lack of Latinx United Methodist mentors and experts who can facilitate growth and bridge those communities with the compelling message that United Methodist Churches are striving to share.
- There is a lack of queer clergy representation in The United Methodist Church at this time.

These findings call attention to the absence of certain groups from the United Methodist community in the culturally diverse region of northern Illinois and to the need for further networking.

Though these needs are overwhelming, they also indicate great potential for improvement, many opportunities for growth, and new networks for development that strengthen communities and individuals while increasing the impact God can make through the mission and work of the United Methodist Church.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter focuses exclusively on capturing the significant experiences shared by the participants in this study. While this text is a condensed version of much deeper conversations, it preserves the profound reflections and emotions that were openly shared. Hence, this portion of the study should be held in high regard for the time and emotional energy the participants spent recalling these memories, which testify to years of faithful ministry, to tears and many sleepless nights, and to the divine hand woven through every act of dedication it displays, both explicitly and implicitly. It should also be acknowledged that the few stories shared from each of their ministry settings may not be the most significant memory or the only memory they hold from those settings, but rather what they were willing and able to share, as they were advised to use discretion in what they shared.

To protect participant confidentiality, all identifying information, such as names of individuals, churches, and towns, certain ethnicities, and specific roles, have been removed due to the sensitive nature of the data.

R1: White Male, interview by author, Glencoe, IL, November 5, 2025

R1, a White male clergy person, served as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church for over four decades, beginning in the late 1970s. He described his upbringing in a rural, culturally homogeneous setting where family life and church participation were central. Practices such as prayer and shared meals shaped his early spiritual formation and later grounded his ministry. Although expected to continue in his family's agricultural work, he discerned a call to

ministry and pursued theological education, where early cross-cultural and international experiences expanded his understanding of the Church.

Following ordination, R1 entered an itinerant pattern of ministry largely situated in congregations undergoing transition, including mergers and shifts in identity. He described one early appointment as the context in which he first experienced "burnout," recognizing the severity only when his physical health failed, recalling that his "body shut down" from overwork. He interpreted this as a critical moment of awareness regarding his limits. Through subsequent appointments, he continued to serve in increasingly complex settings, including multicultural congregations, which he experienced as both challenging and formative, particularly as he navigated racial and cultural differences without formal preparation. He later served in a large, multi-staff congregation, which he understood as a season of sustained leadership, before concluding his ministry in a rural church that he described as feeling like "going home," a context he experienced as mutually healing.

A central turning point in R1's narrative was a significant family crisis, which he described as both "the worst of the worst" and "the most blessed and best." He interpreted this experience as requiring deep "soul work" and as shaping his understanding of life as holding together contradictions—"wounded and well," "broken and holding together." From an IPA perspective, this reflects an ongoing process of meaning-making in which suffering is integrated rather than resolved, a process he described as continuing into retirement.

R1 identified consistent spiritual practices as central to his resilience, including daily scripture reading and prayer, long-term engagement with Disciple Bible Study, participation in a weekly small group, and a brief, embodied practice centered on the hymn "Amazing Grace." He

also emphasized the importance of relational supports, including colleagues and, following his crisis, clergy counselors, which he experienced as essential for deeper reflection and healing.

In reflecting on his ministry, R1 acknowledged limitations in self-care and relational attentiveness, noting that he often prioritized ministry over family and friends, at times to the detriment of his health. He framed these not only as regrets but as part of a broader pattern shaped by pastoral expectations. In retirement, he continues to engage in teaching, mentoring, and volunteer ministry, describing this season as a continuation rather than an end to his vocation. R1's narrative suggests a dominant meaning thread of resilience through sustained spiritual discipline and the ongoing reinterpretation of crisis, offering a foundation for the thematic analysis that follows.

R2: Southeast Asian Male, interview by author, Zoom video chat, December 1, 2025

R2, a Southeast Asian male clergy person, served in ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church for over four decades beginning in the 1980s. R2 situated his vocational journey within his experience of migration, describing himself as "a product of the U.S. missionary efforts in Asia," and interpreting each relocation as an opportunity for growth. His early ministry in rural Anglo congregations was marked by a sense of unexpected acceptance, which he found formative in developing pastoral practices and confidence, even as he later sought new challenges out of restlessness.

As his ministry progressed, R2 moved into more complex settings, including multi-staff congregations, where he emphasized collaborative leadership and the cultivation of collegial networks as essential supports. A key turning point occurred during an associate role in which he became more aware of his racialized identity, feeling pressure to embody a "model Asian pastor."

He interpreted this period as formative for establishing boundaries, developing self-care, and navigating structured leadership systems. Across several appointments, he encountered relational conflicts that required sustained engagement, including one situation in which he chose to remain rather than relocate, drawing on mentoring and pastoral care training to repair relationships. He described this as shaping his commitment to relational integrity in ministry.

A significant shift emerged when he was appointed to a congregation sharing his ethnic background, which he experienced as "being back home" and as a realization of a previously unarticulated vocational longing. He interpreted this context as offering a sense of mutual belonging within a diasporic community. Later appointments included both challenges and meaningful moments, such as navigating staff conflict and participating in inclusive ministry settings, which he experienced as opportunities to expand his understanding of justice and pastoral care. His final appointment centered on congregational healing, which he understood as a fitting culmination of his ministry.

R2 identified daily devotional life, interpretive engagement with scripture, and attentiveness to joy in ordinary life as central spiritual practices. His dominant meaning thread reflects resilience through adaptive learning, relational networks, and interpretive spirituality. He also emphasized the importance of mentorship, collegial relationships, and family support, while acknowledging the strain of frequent relocation.

In reflecting on limitations, R2 expressed regret for not seeking counseling because of concerns about vulnerability, later recognizing its potential value. He also noted the absence of extended renewal practices such as sabbaticals, citing structural and financial constraints. In retirement, he continues to engage in mentoring and ministry within his community, interpreting his vocational journey as ongoing formation.

R3: Queer White Female, interview by author, Zoom video chat, October 15, 2025

R3 described herself as generally healthy, "adventurous yet cautious," and often perceived as "unassuming," a characterization she continues to interpret as meaningful. She grew up in a rural southern context where prayer and church life shaped her early spiritual formation, and where her experiences of the divine were affirmed by family and clergy. She traced her call to ministry to an awakening during her college years through biblical studies and Wesleyan theology, with early formation shaped by challenging practicum experiences in correctional and congregational settings.

Her first appointment as a solo pastor became an early test of her pastoral identity, marked by conflict and challenges to her authority. With support from denominational leadership and congregants, she remained, interpreting this period as formative for resilience through prayer, surrender, and communal affirmation. Subsequent appointments required cultural adaptation across urban and suburban settings, where she developed consistent spiritual rhythms, particularly daily scripture engagement and lectionary preaching. She also encountered gender-based resistance, which she experienced as evolving over time toward greater acceptance.

A significant turning point occurred during a later appointment when she experienced a personal crisis, including the end of her marriage and the integration of her identity as a lesbian. She described a moment of spiritual clarity in which she experienced divine acceptance, marking a shift toward living with integrity. This led to a vocational transition from the United Methodist Church to the United Church of Christ, which she experienced as both loss and renewal, providing a context for fuller integration of identity and calling.

Within this new setting, R3 engaged diverse spiritual practices, including retreats, pilgrimages, and monastic traditions, which she described as deepening her self-awareness and

expanding her spiritual life. She maintained core practices of journaling, scripture reading, and prayer, while emphasizing openness to ongoing formation. Her dominant meaning thread reflects resilience through integrity, spiritual integration, and adaptive growth.

R3 also identified relational support as essential, including therapy, spiritual direction, and collegial networks. She described therapy as particularly important during times of crisis and mentoring as both sustaining and formative. In reflecting on her limitations, she noted regrets about family attentiveness and pastoral relationships, interpreting them as part of ongoing learning.

Regarding rest, she described limited engagement with extended renewal practices earlier in her ministry, contrasting this with later mandated sabbaticals, which she found beneficial. In retirement, she continues to engage in reflection, learning, and relational connection, emphasizing the importance of joy, integrity, and openness to change. Her narrative highlights how resilience is shaped through the integration of identity, sustained spiritual practice, and engagement with changing institutional contexts.

R4: African American Female, interview by author, Zoom video chat, September 25, 2025

R4, an African American female, entered ordained ministry in the late 1990s as a second career and served for over two decades while raising a child and caring for her mother. She traced her call to early life experiences she interpreted as encounters with the divine, which grounded her identity and sustained her through ministry. Though her path into full-time ministry developed gradually, she understood these formative moments as anchoring her purpose.

Her ministry spanned urban, suburban, and denominational contexts, each presenting distinct challenges. In her first appointment to a predominantly white congregation, she faced both “traumatic” and formative experiences, including racial harassment toward her family. She interpreted her response—rooted in prayer and honest communication—as key to building trust and deepening relationships. This experience shaped her pastoral identity, particularly in navigating race, gender, and authority.

In a later appointment within an African American congregation, she experienced relational distance and comparison to her predecessor, which she found painful. She engaged deeply with scripture, drawing strength from biblical narratives of perseverance while also reflecting on her own role in conflict. She maintained a commitment to pastoral care despite hurt, emphasizing her approach as choosing to love others through difficulty. Over time, relationships shifted, and those who had resisted her later expressed appreciation.

As an associate pastor in a large suburban church, R4 encountered both leadership opportunities and racialized assumptions, including inequities in compensation. She addressed these challenges while fostering dialogue and growth, strengthening her collaborative leadership and ministry skills. In a subsequent senior pastor role, criticism of her leadership further shaped her embrace of an authentic pastoral identity. She later served in denominational leadership, which she described as a meaningful culmination of her ministry.

Throughout her journey, R4 relied on spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, scripture, and music. She emphasized attentiveness to God in daily life and the importance of relationships, mentoring, and honest communication. She also noted limited awareness of sabbaticals earlier in her career and later encouraged their use. Her few regrets centered on missed family time and unrealized educational goals.

R4's narrative reflects resilience grounded in spiritual practice, relational courage, and self-examination, particularly amid racial and interpersonal challenges. In retirement, she continues to engage in mentoring and spiritual reflection, carrying forward the practices that sustained her ministry.

R5: East Asian Female, interview by author, Zoom video chat, October 7, 2025

R5, an East Asian female, immigrated to the United States as a young adult and served in full-time ministry for over three decades, primarily in suburban white congregations. She described her ministry as mobile and adaptive, often requesting relocation while maintaining meaningful relationships. As one of the first Asian women clergy in her context, she experienced ministry as a process of mutual learning across cultural differences. She noted that language shaped her leadership, contributing to a calm, deliberate, and non-anxious presence. A guiding conviction throughout her ministry was that experiences of harm were often accompanied by care.

Her ministry included both associate and solo roles, often as the first Asian clergy in her settings. In her initial appointment, she experienced strong mentorship but limited authority and preaching opportunities, which she partly attributed to language barriers. This led her to seek greater leadership responsibility. In later appointments, she encountered both affirmation and conflict, particularly around issues of inclusion, requiring her to navigate criticism while remaining grounded in her calling. Support from colleagues and mentors was essential during these periods.

R5's experiences reflected both belonging and marginalization. Some congregations embraced her fully, while others limited her leadership or underutilized her gifts. Personal transitions, including single parenthood, further shaped her ministry, with supportive communities playing a key role. A turning point came as she recognized the limits of her cross-cultural exposure, prompting broader engagement and a sabbatical that allowed her to reconnect with her cultural heritage. However, later appointments also included conflict and difficult transitions that deepened her awareness of institutional vulnerability.

In subsequent roles, she continued to navigate challenges related to gender, authority, and family responsibilities. Despite these tensions, she maintained a strong sense of calling, continuing part-time ministry after retirement.

Her spiritual practices centered on early-morning prayer, scripture reading, and reflection, often adapted to her context. She also relied on communal practices such as prayer partnerships, small groups, and mentoring relationships. Opportunities for rest were limited, aside from one externally funded sabbatical. She expressed regret about not advocating for herself more and the personal cost of prioritizing ministry over family, recognizing the influence of cultural expectations.

R5's narrative reflects resilience through adaptability, relational endurance, and sustained spiritual practice across cultural and institutional boundaries. She remains open to ongoing ministry and mentoring, viewing her experiences—both affirming and difficult—as formative to her pastoral identity.

R6: White Female, interview by author, Zoom video chat, November 3, 2025

R6, a white female, served in ordained ministry for over three decades in both local and conference-level roles. She described her vocation as a willingness to "go anywhere that God would send her," understanding her ministry as continually evolving beyond retirement. After discerning her call across denominations that did not support women's ordination, she found a home in the United Methodist Church, where she experienced both theological alignment and institutional support.

Her early ministry included a solo pastoral role in a suburban congregation navigating demographic change and conflict, where she developed key leadership and pastoral care skills. A subsequent rural appointment exposed her to a contrasting cultural context, where she experienced both deep community connection and resistance to her leadership. She interpreted these early experiences as formative in learning to navigate difference and conflict.

As an associate pastor in a large suburban church, she encountered a complex, multi-staff environment that broadened her understanding of organizational leadership, boundaries, and congregational dynamics. She contributed by developing structured pastoral care systems and found support through collegial relationships. In a later co-pastor role, she helped lead a congregation through the aftermath of pastoral misconduct, focusing on advocacy, healing, and collaboration with denominational leadership. This work contributed to her transition into conference leadership.

In conference roles, R6 shifted to broader administrative responsibilities, including clergy care, conflict mediation, and leadership development. She described these roles as both impactful and isolating due to the need for confidentiality and strong boundaries. Support from national,

ecumenical, and collegial networks became essential as she adapted her pastoral identity to institutional leadership contexts.

Her spiritual practices were integrated into daily rhythms, including prayer and reflection during work and travel, especially during long commutes. She also engaged in retreats and relied on relationships with bishops and colleagues for support. While on vacation, she noted that sabbaticals and extended rest were not emphasized to her, later recognizing their potential value.

R6 reflected on the strain the ministry placed on family relationships and now views retirement as a time to rebuild connections and redefine balance. She understands her calling as ongoing, even as roles shift. Her narrative reflects resilience through adaptive identity, institutional leadership, and spiritual integration within everyday life.

R7: African American Male, interview by author, Zoom video chat, July 30, 2025

R7 served in ordained ministry for over four decades, beginning in the early 1980s, describing himself as “a sponge” who continually sought opportunities to learn and grow beyond the local church. He understood ministry as extending across the wider denomination, embracing multiple roles as spaces for leadership development and spiritual formation. His call emerged during college through involvement in youth ministry and mentorship, leading him from a planned corporate career into ordained ministry. During seminary, he developed his pastoral identity in a multi-staff setting and took on significant leadership, including guiding a struggling social service organization. He interpreted its eventual success as an affirmation of his call, grounded in prayer amid grief and pressure.

He later served a newly merged congregation, navigating cultural integration that required both relational and structural leadership. This led to conference-level leadership as a cabinet member, where he developed skills in advocacy, addressing inequities, and institutional leadership. Afterward, he returned to a meaningful local church context while remaining active in broader denominational work through mentoring and teaching. A later transition into higher education leadership expanded his impact, where he advanced diversity, global partnerships, and accessibility, before returning to local church ministry in a multicultural urban setting and preparing intentionally for retirement.

R7's narrative reflects resilience through expansive engagement, viewing ministry as relational, networked, and continually evolving. His spiritual practices included daily walks while listening to hymns, engagement with sermons, and ongoing learning. Equally important were relationships with colleagues, mentoring across generations, and participation in covenant groups, all of which sustained him.

He emphasized mentorship as central to ministry, both giving and receiving guidance. Although he intended longer sabbaticals, he often shortened them, prioritizing engagement in ministry. He did not report burnout, attributing his energy to a strong sense of purpose. In retirement, he continues to learn, mentor, and stay connected, viewing this stage as an ongoing extension of his calling.

Analysis of the Interviews

The division of the stories collected was by life stages, defined three stages in their ministry journey:

1. Before seminary, discovering their call to ministry;
2. In ministry, which included their time in seminary education, engaged in training in ministry through their immersion experience in a ministry setting; and
3. After retirement, each of the participants identified it as an adventure and a journey of its own.

Within the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis framework, these stages function as interpretive lenses to help make meaning of the participants' lived experiences. Though the analysis at a glance displays lists and categories, studied in depth with each of their narratives, and cross-examined with subthemes, they are emerging themes for making further meaning.

It is worth noting that each participant spent a different amount of time in each stage, but no obvious impact was observed in the analysis of the collected data on the study's main theme: the spiritual disciplines that contributed to their resilience in ministry. This suggests that resilience is not determined by the duration of a particular state but by how participants interpreted and engaged their experiences within those stages.

There were two other details worth mentioning that were omitted in the process of multiple stages of analysis. First was the details of the participants' ages, which a few of them willingly revealed. However, their age was not a factor in impacting their experiences of ministry or the practices they engaged in to sustain their relationship with God. Therefore, age was not requested from the remaining participants who had not shared it, and what was shared was deleted from the first draft of the verbatim. The second detail omitted was the exact years they were in ministry and when they retired. Those details would add valuable context, linking the study’s analysis to specific events within the United Methodist Church, in northern Illinois, and the world. However, as confidentiality was of high priority in this study due to some of the

detailed challenges these participants faced, the circumstances in which those challenges revealed themselves, and the essential spiritual growth that occurred through specific spiritual disciplines, those details were purposely deleted in the second layer of analysis that formed the summary of each story. It was also necessary to omit the specific years because the dates and locations of their ministry are publicly available on social media and in other records within the wider church, which would compromise confidentiality. This honored the responsibility in the process within IPA methodology.

Appendix 3 contains the four charts used in the narrative analysis of the data collected. The charts are organized by the three life stages of the participants' vocational ministry, each listing, in alphabetical order, the spiritual disciplines mentioned by the participants, as derived from the interview summaries. They are also color-coded, grouping how many participants participated in the same spiritual practice and when. The fourth chart displays the regrets they revealed after retirement, ordered by the number of participants who shared each regret, from most to fewest.

And while the data were organized into charts for the initial method of analysis, the IPA method focuses not on numbers and measurements of groupings but on the meaning derived from each participant's reflection and the meaning that emerges collectively.

Foundational Formation Before Seminary

The most important finding of this study is that all participants identified the same spiritual disciplines as their most consistent and meaningful practices before seminary: attending church weekly, praying regularly, and reading scripture along with other spiritual and theological texts. These were not just activities but foundational patterns through which participants began to

interpret their relationship with God and discern their calling. Although each described different levels of childhood church involvement, all intensified these practices in young adulthood, especially during college, where they became daily routines. This emerging theme shows that these spiritual practices were initial spaces of discernment for ministry, a foundation for building their vocational lives, and a grounding for the storms ahead.

Several participants engaged in these practices early in the morning, describing them as grounding. In their view, these rhythms did not merely organize their day but also shaped their identity before God. Therefore, formation was not theoretical but embodied through repeated, intentional practices.

A second interpretive theme is openness to uncertainty. Participants described leaving home, country, or established careers with what one called a "reckless abandonment to God." This language indicates that risk itself became a place of trust and discernment. These changes—whether geographic, vocational, or cultural—served as formative experiences that helped clarify their sense of calling.

Mentorship also played a crucial role. Relationships with pastors helped participants interpret and pursue their calling, shaping their understanding of ministry and their identity within it. For female participants, this process occurred amid tension, as they navigated institutional limitations while answering God's call. Their later experiences as the first women clergy in their communities reflect how early formation was not only recognized but also challenged and embodied.

Additional practices, including serving others and participating in music, especially hymns, further demonstrated that early formation was both thoughtful and expressive. What might seem like "exceptions"—such as walking, immersing oneself in other faith communities,

or attending early morning worship in different cultural settings—do not break this pattern but enhance it, indicating that formation is always understood through specific contexts.

Practices of Sustained Resilience in Ministry

In ministry, the core practices of prayer, scripture reading, and worship did not fade away; instead, they became deeply internalized. Participants no longer called them deliberate disciplines but described them as integrated ways of being. What started as intentional practice transformed into a lasting habit, showing that resilience is grounded in formation that has been fully embodied.

At the same time, additional practices emerged as necessary supports. Family, colleagues, and covenant groups became vital sources of grounding. Participants consistently described family as an anchor, although this anchoring was not static. “Home” shifted over time, influenced by relocation and changing circumstances, indicating that stability in ministry is not fixed but continually renegotiated.

Teaching served as a core interpretive practice. Through preaching and leading Bible studies, participants engaged in continuous reflection on scripture, describing this as “living the hermeneutics of life.” In this process, scripture and lived experience constantly inform each other. This shows an active, ongoing process of meaning-making in which participants interpret their lives through theological frameworks.

Mentoring others deepened their practice of meaning-making and reflection in ministry. As participants guided future clergy, they revisited and reinterpreted their own calling narratives. This also became an ongoing practice throughout their ministry that continued throughout the entirety of their vocational life, even beyond retirement.

Resilience was also maintained through attentiveness to daily routines: finding joy in small moments, engaging in the arts, and spending intentional time with family. These practices indicate that endurance in ministry is sustained not solely through formal disciplines but also through mindfulness and active participation in everyday life.

A key interpretive theme is the acceptance of duality. Participants described learning to hold together contradiction—criticism alongside affirmation, loss alongside blessing. This interpretive stance helped them stay grounded in difficulty, trusting that meaning develops over time. Resilience, therefore, is not the absence of tension but the ability to interpret it within a larger framework of faith.

Identity, Boundaries, and Prophetic Agency

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of standing their ground in ministry, especially during moments of conflict. They viewed this not as a personality trait but as a vital practice. Prophetic leadership and boundary-setting emerged as key skills for maintaining integrity in ministry. Their interpretations of this practice varied: some rooted it in theological beliefs, while others connected it to advocating for vulnerable communities or responding to injustice. Notably, women and clergy of color saw their prophetic identity as navigating complex issues of race, gender, and authority. Even when experiences of injustice were not explicitly mentioned, the need for clarity, boldness, and boundaries remained essential. Resilience, in this context, is not just internal but enacted. It demands the ability to act with clarity and conviction within contested spaces. Identity is not fixed; it is continually shaped and expressed through these moments of decision and action.

Relocation within the itinerant system further illustrates this dynamic. Several participants requested moves even when ministry was going well, indicating that faithfulness was not equated with stability. Instead, these decisions were seen as responses to calling, growth, or integrity. Movement itself became part of how participants discerned and lived out their vocation.

Engagement in justice and advocacy also reflects this outward expression of identity. Whether shaped by personal experience or pastoral encounter, this work becomes a space where participants' understanding of themselves and their calling continues to grow.

Friendship as Sacred Practice

An unexpected yet important spiritual practice is the role of friendship. Every participant described forming meaningful friendships within ministry settings, not as a coincidence but as essential. These relationships were seen as a vital way to stay connected to ministry. For those who faced racism or sexism, friendship served as a crucial source of support and resilience. Instead of being secondary to ministry, these relationships were understood as a core part of it. Friendship, in this way, becomes a sacred practice—an intentional and vital form of grounding that allows for ongoing engagement in ministry. This reframes how relational life is understood in vocational ministry. What might be perceived as informal or peripheral is, in fact, central to sustaining both identity and calling.

Rest Deferred and the Cost of Itinerancy

A contrasting pattern emerges around rest. While many participants eventually took sabbaticals or renewal leaves, these were often delayed, unstructured, or underutilized. This

reflects not only personal decisions but a broader lack of clarity and support around practices of rest. Instead of extended rests, participants adapted by shifting spiritual disciplines—such as moving prayer and scripture reading to early mornings—to protect time with God amid increasing demands. However, these adaptations also reveal the pressure of ministry, where rest is often deferred rather than integrated.

The itinerant system further complicates this dynamic. Frequent relocations, even when voluntary, require ongoing adjustments and often disrupt stability for both pastors and their families. Moving, while meaningful, also involves significant costs that are expected but can sometimes unexpectedly impact the well-being of the pastor and their families. In some cases, these effects become tangible. Experiences of overwork, crises, and even hospitalization highlight the limits of sustained ministry without adequate support structures. These stories show that resilience, though present, is not without strain. It is negotiated within systems that both support and restrict these extended and much-needed times of rest and distancing from vocational pressures and demands.

Continuity of Calling After Retirement

After retirement, the core practices of prayer, scripture reading, and worship continued, but their significance changed. No longer connected to work demands, they became ways to maintain a relationship with God rather than methods for supporting ministry.

Participants remained engaged in ministry in various forms—preaching occasionally, mentoring, volunteering, and supporting colleagues. This suggests that calling does not end but is reinterpreted. Ministry becomes less about role and more about presence.

Relationships took on renewed significance as participants described reconnecting with family and friends, often addressing neglected areas. Gratitude and reflection became central themes, indicating a shift from striving to integration.

Learning and creativity also emerged as essential practices. Engaging in hobbies like writing, painting, or gardening signifies reclaiming parts of life that were previously set aside. These activities are not separate from vocation but represent its ongoing expression and serve as sacred and creative spaces where the hermeneutics of life continue.

Although retirement experiences vary, a common understanding remains: individuals continue to fulfill their calling in new ways. Their connection with God, others, and the world endures, now guided by reflection, healing, and a deeper sense of presence — a renewal of self, where adventure continues in new forms, and where resilience finds security in restoring wellbeing and balance instead of reacting with fear and engaging in a survival-driven mindset.

Interpretation of Regrets

The most emotionally intense portion of the interview emerged as participants reflected on their regrets. While their initial sharing was their personal reflection, a deeper interpretative listening revealed that these regrets pointed to a broader pattern of structure and an embedded culture of ministry.

All the participants expressed varying intensities of pain and resentment as they discussed their relationships with family and friends and the impact their prioritization had on those relationships. As they described memories of family crises, missing important family functions, and strains in their relationships due to ministry-related events, they reflected on the challenges of sacrifice, a sense of duty, and their commitment to the divine calling of ministry. This suggests

a great tension between ministry and family life, beyond finding a balance in their personal life. As they leaned on their own capabilities and time in their ministry settings, their trust in God's grace and prayer was in their personal relationships during their time of ministry. This area of their lives was where they spent most of their time beyond retirement— reconciling, healing, coping, and rebuilding. Therefore, their grief and resentment is not only about what they lost but about how their life of ministry was lived out and understood.

The second significant theme of regrets centered on sabbatical and renewal leaves. As most participants reported either not taking their rest leaves or taking them too late, they initially framed the missed opportunity as a minor occurrence. However, they also expressed their lack of information, the cost, and, in hindsight, a reflection on "how helpful it could have been." However, they leaned heavily on spiritual disciplines, a sense of duty, and perseverance — traits needed for resilience, a coping mechanism for pain, and a reaction to overcoming challenges. Instead of seeing rest and time for recuperation as essential, even crucial, to their well-being, they perceived them as options, inaccessible, and even a luxury. In hindsight, they have realized that the sabbaticals and renewal leaves were missed opportunities for growth and sustainability that could have enhanced their ministry experience and overall health.

The reflections of the three Asian participants are a particular finding worth mentioning, as they described their hesitation to pursue sabbatical leave and grounded their reasoning in the financial burden on the congregation they were serving. Their restraint reflected a deeper cultural formation around responsibility, sacrifice, and communal care, as well as an implicit assumption and perceived expectation. This finding reveals how multiple layers of expectation shape what feels accepted within ministry.

Other regrets the participants mentioned included the lack of attention they gave to friends outside of ministry, which they are working to restore. Though this reflection may seem like a small matter, a deeper interpretation suggests that these retired clergy allude to how narrow their lives have become as a result of their vocational roles. This suggests that resilience requires relational diversity, something that was not sustained during active ministry.

The theme of overworking also points to the embodied cost of ministry. Participants spoke of physical exhaustion and long-term health consequences, indicating that the demands of ministry were carried not only emotionally and spiritually, but physically. This reveals that resilience often depended on the body's capacity to endure, sometimes beyond its limits.

Gender also shapes the experience of regret. Female participants expressed a desire to have exercised more authority in their leadership. Their reflections suggest that their restraint was not simply personal but shaped by the context in which they served. Their regret is not only about what they did not do, but about the condition that made their leadership difficult to embody fully.

Finally, some participants expressed regret about not pursuing future education or professional development. While this appears to be an individual reflection as a desire to grow and increase their effectiveness in ministry, this points to a greater experience of feeling limited in their opportunity to grow, their sense of inadequacy, or a restraint in the structure that they perceived as a lack of support or a lack of opportunity for growth.

These regrets show that resilience in ministry isn't just about maintaining one's calling over time. It also involves navigating the systems that influence how that calling is lived out. Using an interpretive perspective, these reflections reveal tensions between faithfulness and sustainability, and between commitment and cost. The participants' stories indicate resilience

was achieved, but often due to a lack of or absence of the necessary structures to support them. Therefore, these regrets highlight the need to rethink how pastors are supported, trained, and cared for within their environment. These essential changes in systems and processes are not only about improving ministry effectiveness but also about ensuring their survival and well-being.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Implications

This concluding chapter brings into focus the findings of this interpretative phenomenological analysis of seven retired clergy, integrating their lived experiences of resilience in vocational ministry. Through multi-layered reflection and interpretation of their narratives, this study has identified key patterns that inform both the endurance and the strain of pastoral life, including the formative role of spiritual practices, sustaining relationships, and an evolving sense of identity grounded in divine calling. At the same time, these accounts expose the inherent tensions of ministry, particularly the personal and familial costs that often accompany long-term vocational commitment. In response, this chapter integrates these insights to articulate their implications for personal practice, local congregations, and denominational structures, while evoking a theological understanding of resilience that moves beyond survival toward wholeness, integration, and faithful sustainability in ministry.

Personal Implications

Paul Nixon, a United Methodist pastor and author, wrote in his book, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church*, that "a church can blossom and grow anywhere if it will become healthy enough spiritually and pay attention to the needs, experiences, and sensibilities of those it seeks to serve."[1] He urges pastors to reject the idea that their duty is to focus on and cater to the negative aspects of their current ministry situation, maintaining the status quo, and comforting the church into staying as it is. Instead, Nixon encourages pastors to intentionally choose to see the positive — life-giving, expansive, adventurous, and fun – and to lead with a sense of urgency and

[1] Paul Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 13.

boldness.[2] He suggests that for the church to remain vital and engaged, the pastor's perception and mindset are crucial.[3]

The stories from this study aligned with Nixon's idea for me—that to be an effective pastor, I must constantly choose to stay positive, active, and hopeful. As I observed each study participant, I found inspiration for my own ministry path. I recognize that I will continue to be inspired by these stories in the years to come as I reflect and interpret them both individually and as a group of participants in this study.

As I reflect on the most emotional and impactful portion of their interviews, their reflection of regrets, I am motivated to find ways to prioritize my family over ministry when needs arise to protect the mental and emotional well-being of those I care about most. Reflecting on the study participants' dedication to their vocational ministry that contributed to broken family ties and the mental health crisis of their children, I am inspired to safeguard my relationship with my family, especially my young children, so I do not repeat the painful outcomes that all study participants claim and resent. This study taught me how vital it is to create healthy and supportive environments—not just for my church and the communities I serve, but also for my own family. My vocational ministry is not just about me and my ministry setting; it is my family's ministry, and their health is my health, which in turn impacts my ministry.

Prioritizing my family in ministry also references other practices the participants identified as essential. It is important to find joy in everyday moments and to create a "home"—a mental state I can consistently settle into, separate from church work. Deb Dana, in her book

[2] Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!*

[3] Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!*

Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory, describes this place of balance.

> Anchored is about getting reacquainted with bodily feelings without the familiar embedded association of these feelings with dangerous events. By establishing a secure anchor within the body, we can safely explore feelings that would previously be destabilizing. Having an anchor provides the stability to explore and safely feel the wounds still held in the body. This process supports the journey of healing in which the nervous system will become sufficiently resilient to engage others and find humor and excitement, not threat, while navigating a complex and often unpredictable world.[4]

The participants' stories clearly showed that they did not define themselves solely by their church ministry, nor did they invest only in it as their main identity. Although physical distancing from the ministry setting during vacations and short drives for breaks was important and valued, I learned that they intentionally found identity in other areas—such as friends, colleagues, family, organizations, agencies, and conference committees—that they cared about, enjoyed, and found purpose in. They looked for ways to make an impact elsewhere and actively sought a broader perspective, which also influenced how their local church perceived and served the world. Every individual went home emotionally and mentally to be refreshed—listening to music, watching movies, reading leisurely, taking walks, or spending quality time with family or alone intentionally.

I also recognize the need to be more engaged in conversations with seminary students, pastors in training, and those interested in vocational ministry. This isn't just about participating in the ordination of clergy for the health of my denomination, but also as a spiritual practice for my own well-being. As the study results showed, it was very important for all participants to regularly revisit and reflect on their calling narrative. This vital practice helped them better articulate it while it provided opportunities for them to refine it as they progressed in their

[4] Deb Dana, *Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2021), xiii.

ministry journey. They nurtured their joy and enthusiasm for learning by engaging deeply with innovative ministry ideas, new theories, and leadership techniques, even as their passion for ministry was challenged as they helped their mentees discern and articulate their calling into vocational ministry. I must seek opportunities to mentor future ministry candidates as another way to stay grounded in God's calling for my life.

I will also gather resources to plan for a sabbatical leave in the near future based on the results of this study. Even though sabbatical leaves are currently optional in the United Methodist Church, this study highlighted the importance of pursuing meaningful sabbatical leave to support personal growth and strengthen my ministry journey. I learned that extended leaves should not be seen as a reaction to exhaustion or a last resort before burnout, but as an intentional practice of fostering well-being and renewal — an act of grounding and deepening faith and spiritual growth.

Implications for Local Congregations

The practice of teaching was a key grounding exercise of study participants. Though extensive Bible study curricula like Disciple Bible Study were formative for many churches in the past and for a few today, it is not as robust as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, when many of these study participants were energetically leading and teaching, Though essential programs such as service projects and book studies have become more prevalent in church programs compared to Bible Studies, there is great value to them that extends beyond the inspiration and the learning that happens for church members. They increase the pastor's opportunity to prepare and teach, which in turn impacts how much time and effort they put into studying and reflecting on it for themselves. This suggests that churches need to reinsert Biblical studies into their

program, taught by their pastors, as the main discipleship tool for the health of the pastor, the church, and the global church.

Pastors must spent countless hours steeped in prayer. This kept them in constant connection with the divine, giving them guidance and helping them navigate through challenges. Prayer gave them the ability to be open to wherever God was leading them, trusting that God would provide what they needed through breakthrough prayer in times of uncertainty.[5] In times of crisis, whether through their church or in their personal lives, they endured and persevered through private prayer and with their trusted colleagues. As prayer impacted the pastors' longevity in ministry, if the church is to survive the changing world and thrive, weather the storm for themselves-- it is imperative that they also are constantly praying and are seeking guidance from God in prayer. Brenda K Buckwell highlighted in her book that prayer is a three-way listening with God, a spiritual direction session where God, the church, and the pastor engage in listening and speaking in transparency, expressing of hunger and yearning where God shows up.[6]

Paul Nixon, the CEO of the Epicenter Group and Director of Church Multiplication for the United Methodist Church who trains church leaders and pastors refers to one of the most important components of church vitality, their practice of prayer that "has three broad themes – (1) prayer, (2) deep listening, and (3) clarifying identity and core commitments, offering coherence to the church."[7]

As Buckwell, expert in spiritual direction, and Nixon, expert in leadership and church vitality, both emphasize, prayer with multiple rich themes for church growth and vitality, should

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[5]Sue Nilson Kibbey, *Ultimate Reliance* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

[6] Brenda K. Buckwell, *Spiritual Direction and the Metamorphosis of Church* (Nashville: Wesley's Foundery Books, 2020), 17.

[7] Paul, Nixon, *Multi: The Chemistry of Church Diversity, (*Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2019), 19

be a foundational spiritual practice for the church as it was for the pastors who ministered in longevity. As pastors weathered the storms, so can the church, in prayer.

The pastor's role is demanding, which offers their local church the chance to support them and their family. Pastors often prioritize the church over their families, and as a result, their families sometimes suffer. This can increase stress on the pastor and, often, lead to negative outcomes. Pastors' families may fall apart, their children might face neglect, and their mental and emotional health can decline. The stress placed on the pastor's family also drains them emotionally, physically, and especially spiritually, which ultimately affects the health of the church. The church should be intentional about fostering a strong relationship with the pastor's family, acknowledging that, in most cases, they have already sacrificed much for the church—sometimes to their own detriment. By being more thoughtful and deliberate, the church can better support their pastors' families.

Additionally, the church can encourage its pastor to engage in as many relationships outside of the church as he or she does within it and for the church. Resilient pastors engage in relationships outside of the local church, such as holding key positions on denominational committees, serving as members of boards of agencies, and representing the church on school district boards or social services organizations near and far from the congregation they serve. They built their identity not only with their congregation as pastors but also within the broader community and in other parts of the world. Since the pastor's identity is shared and anchored in other ministry settings beyond their local church, pastors are more likely to be resilient when they find ways to step away from what keeps them confined or disconnected from the world. Their vibrant activities outside their local church provide the pastors with opportunities to reflect, interact with others, broaden their worldview, and witness their impact beyond their immediate

setting. They find inspiration, take breaks for rest, and refocus when they return to the local church. Pastors who are confined, disconnected, or consumed by boredom admit that those moments could lead to trouble, prompting some to consider relocating where their talents and time would be better valued and utilized. It is essential that the church supports pastors in expanding their reach and staying active in their roles, even if that means working outside their offices and staying connected through other means.

Church leaders are encouraged to support their pastors in participating in retreats and learning opportunities offered by the denomination to enhance their leadership skills and spiritual growth. This support also helps them expand their network of resources and colleagues, enabling participation in immersion and pilgrimage experiences. Such experiences give pastors opportunities to reflect on their identity and see the world in new and inspiring ways. The church can strongly endorse and hold its pastors accountable for joining collegial groups, such as denominational or interfaith covenant groups and Bible study groups. They should also mentor student pastors and candidates for ministry and meet regularly with mentors, ministry coaches, spiritual directors, and therapists. Additionally, the church can facilitate opportunities for pastors to visit other faith communities on Sundays several times a year as “work trips” to inspire them. It can also work with pastors to plan longer breaks, like sabbaticals and renewal leaves, in collaboration with denominational leaders, and secure resources to fund these leaves if possible. These efforts aim to support their renewal, spiritual growth, and overall well-being.

Churches are also encouraged to form working teams to support their ministry and to provide the pastor with a support system that grounds them. Finding ways to collaborate with the pastor in church activities not only reduces stress for the pastor but also creates a more enjoyable

atmosphere, promotes the pastor's wellbeing, and enhances overall satisfaction and effectiveness in ministry, resulting in a more vibrant church community.

The church has a duty in the world to speak up for the oppressed and to address injustice whenever it is observed. These moments present pastors, who are authorized to speak, with the opportunity to advocate for the voiceless and the hurting, uniting the church in support. It is vital for the church to back their pastors' divine calling and support their efforts in the community and beyond, especially when they are called to exercise their authority in social justice causes, as the retired clergy interviewed expressed. Their prophetic presence is a gift and a responsibility that these pastors perform too infrequently, and they regret missed opportunities. During times when the world is divided, and hostility, conflict, and injustice are prevalent, the church must stand with its pastors to speak out. And if a pastor hesitates, the church must support and empower them.

Finally, it is crucial for the church and the pastor to engage in healthy dialogue, especially during disagreements. Pastors carry both implicit and explicit burdens as they often serve as the bridge between the church and their community, as well as between the church and the denomination. They sometimes act as a link between congregation members. Since pastors are human, bearing significant responsibilities and the burdens and expectations of others, churches need to hear their stories of pain. This helps foster understanding, empathy, and love, allowing everyone to be Jesus to one another. Regular open conversations should be implemented alongside building strong friendships that can endure the discomfort of honest dialogue about pain and the growing edges between pastors and their ministry settings.

Implications for the Denomination

As the pastor commits to the itinerant system and assumes one of their roles as the bridge between the local congregation they serve and the denomination, the denomination's leaders are encouraged to expand their role in supporting the clergy as their representatives beyond the appointment making, the annual meeting of salary setting, and church property assessment.

Clergywomen and clergy of color seek strong support and allies during times of crisis, disagreements, transitions, and relationship struggles. As clergy navigate tension between multiple sets of expectations while bridging gaps between relationships with their family, church, community, and denomination, they often feel isolated with no allies in times of hardship. They need a consistent support team to ground them throughout their vocational ministry, not just in crises, which is where they belong. Denominational leaders can provide that support system, extending their nurturing beyond just appointment-making.

To better support the clergy and congregation beyond just making appointments, denominational leaders can help ensure congregations are responsible for nurturing and caring for the pastors they employ. In addition to providing training to facilitate smooth transitions for pastors and churches receiving new appointments—especially in cross-cultural and cross-racial contexts—it would also be beneficial to offer regular, intentional training in relationship building and conflict management. This proactive approach can help build trust and improve their ability to have important conversations.

While the denomination requires churches to hold their pastors accountable, the current procedures do not ensure that congregations are responsible for supporting and nurturing their pastors. Congregations evaluate and communicate their expectations to their pastors, who then report to the denominational leaders who employ them. Pastors face the challenge of accepting

their appointment and being paid by the congregation. Sometimes, pastors' needs are not properly met, and churches are not held accountable, while pastors often choose to remain non-confrontational to keep the peace. This situation does not benefit the church, the pastors within the itinerant system, or the overall health of the denomination.

Furthermore, significant changes are needed in the current appointment-making process—how pastors are assigned to their local church settings by the Church. This process is causing long-lasting and even dangerous consequences for pastors, and more importantly, for their families. It is important to recognize that the current appointment-making process is complex and multi-layered, involving various factors and many people. It is assumed to be carried out thoughtfully and prayerfully, considering the pastors' gifts and grace, as well as the congregation's missional needs and capabilities. The process involves evaluating their history, hopes, and potential within their community. It is also expected that the needs of the pastors' families are considered. Given that the process is collaborative and influenced by both human and divine factors, as well as unforeseen events, it is unrealistic to expect that mistakes or mismatches will not occur. It is impossible to fully understand all the needs of the local church, the circumstances of the pastors and their families, or the future that lies ahead.

However, the results of this study clearly show that there are significant costs—beyond financial ones—that justify changes in the process to reduce the pain and trauma experienced by many pastors' family members. This is especially urgent for the families of pastors, many of whom may not understand or be able to express the suffering they endure, particularly the youngest members of these families.

Understanding the results of this study is crucial: all participants, regardless of their roles, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, indicated that they prioritize their ministry over their

families and experience guilt and pain because of these choices. It is also evident that, although they speak highly of the denomination and view the sacrifices pastors make to follow God's call as an inherent part of the ministry they value, their intense spiritual routines, exhaustion, burnout, and desperate survival tactics reveal a need for reassessment, focused attention, and change. While working with professionals such as counselors, therapists, mentors, friends, and colleagues is vital, relying on these services only as a last resort, especially when it causes financial strain, should not be the norm. Since pastors trust the appointment system greatly, the negative patterns observed should lead to reforms rather than maintaining a status quo of unexamined traditions.

Subsequently, the denominational leaders should seriously consider providing longer tenures for clergy to ensure the overall health of the church, pastors, and the churches they serve. Furthermore, abrupt appointment changes should be handled with extra caution, and during these transitions, special care must be taken to support the clergy and pastors, requiring a slightly different approach than current processes. All of this is not only for the health of the pastors but also for the overall well-being of their families, which affects their long-term stability. It also impacts the church's health.

Implications for Ordination and Formation

Resilient pastors had strong mentors who guided them over a significant period, suggesting that the current ordination process should include a similar system that offers candidates long-term mentorship. Since consistent, long-term mentors can provide direction, ministry opportunities, pastoral care, and help in discerning the candidate's calling, the current system of monthly meetings or less and brief touchpoints seems to be less effective.

In conjunction with candidates receiving long-term mentoring, active clergy should be kept accountable to mentor candidates, seminary students, or younger clergy to be given the opportunity to articulate and revisit their calling narrative.

To support the ongoing spiritual development of clergy, consideration should be given to providing funding and opportunities for extended leave and transformative experiences in ways that reduce the financial burden on pastors and congregations, especially those of low income or clergy of color. In addition to funding extended breaks, it is essential to educate all clergy and local congregations about the necessity and resources for providing renewal and sabbatical leave, as opportunities for spiritual growth and to promote well-being before it becomes a last resort for survival in the experience of burnout. Further education and strong encouragement should be provided to ensure that clergy receive the assistance they need and are offered ways to enhance their vocational lives, enabling them to serve the church and live out their calling as God intended: thriving, hopeful, and wholesome.

Finally, retired clergy should have access to opportunities for ongoing formation after their retirement. The reality is that retired clergy are eager to engage in church life and seek ways to nurture their love for the church while continuing to develop their gifts and talents creatively. However, opportunities for them to serve are limited, and the places where they can make an impact are too few. Their wisdom and experience have not been fully utilized, even though they can offer valuable insights that could help guide the church and its processes toward greater productivity, better fit, and increased sufficiency.

Future Research

In light of this study, several themes have emerged that can inspire the future health of the church and the denomination. Further research into these themes will enhance effectiveness and facilitate broader changes in the lives of clergy, the local church, and the United Methodist Church as a whole.

1) A comprehensive analysis of the effects of extended leaves on clergy health
2) Impact on congregational health with the involvement of supportive retired clergy
3) Suggestions retired clergy would propose to improve the appointment process, aiming to enhance the well-being of pastors, their families, and the overall church.
4) The in-depth study of the kind of impact retired clergy can make in the different areas of church life
5) What does it look like for the pastor to prioritize their family before the church and still engage in meaningful and successful vocational careers?
6) What would it mean for the Church to be more intentional in making appointments for the pastors ' families?
7) What would it mean for the Church to be accountable to every placement made from consideration of the move to full transition of pastors and their families?
8) What would the appointment-making process look like if pastors' children were one of the top factors on the list to be considered?
9) Though a study is needed for how these extended leaves impact the well-being of pastors and their churches, it is worth investigating with the help of other

denominations that provide those strict guidelines with financial support to increase the health of the UMC pastors.

10) What would it look like for the retired clergy like the seven participants of this study to be on a taskforce to build a new system of appointment making?
11) How can retired clergy be more involved in improving the process of vetting, training, and mentoring future pastors to develop stronger, more resilient pastors who can serve effectively for decades for God in the United Methodist Church?
12) And what would happen to the health of the pastors and their churches if the retired clergy, like the seven interviewed for this project, were sitting at the end of the pew, ready to help each Sunday, willing to assist if asked, with no words but as a strong ally to the pastor?

Retired clergy can use their wealth of experience to guide pastors, local congregations, and the wider Church, sharing their stories to help others face life's challenges.

Final Theological Reflection

Resilience in vocational ministry is not accidental; it is a theological and developmental process that unfolds over time. This study highlights resilience that grows through consistent spiritual practices, supportive relationships, and a clear, evolving sense of identity rooted in divine calling. The heartfelt stories, filled with reflection on lifelong learning, spiritual growth, and strengthening God’s call, deserve more than just a brief sharing. They require an outlet that leaves a legacy of transformation and health in the communities where these individuals invest their whole being—the church, the denomination, and the next generation of clergy.

Through God’s guidance, amid joys, sadness, anger, resentment, pain, and regrets, the retired clergy have grounded themselves in spiritual disciplines—prayer, teaching, reflection, and meaningful relationships. As life's storms and vocational changes shook their lives, they stayed rooted in the unwavering call they had promised to uphold, with God's help, to serve God and transform the world by making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Through the lived experiences and insights of the seven retired clergy, who faithfully served a total of over 160 years in northern Illinois and touched countless lives, true wisdom and inspiration were acquired.

- God’s call into ministry is not a threat to lose oneself, sacrifice well-being, or hold tension that harms others.
- Committing to spread the good news of God’s unconditional love and advancing God’s kingdom on earth is not a promise to live in fear, obligation, or ongoing pain and struggle.

However, the humble and priceless journey of sharing unconditional love with others is a joyful voyage of wholeness, peace, restoration, hope, and resurrection. And a life connected to Jesus, the vine, always produces fruit that endures beyond one generation of the church. The witness of the resilient pastor will leave a legacy of healthy churches, a vital denomination, and a transformed world to the glory of God, allowing new life to grow and thrive.

Appendix 1

Consent form

Esther Lee is conducting research titled, “Weathering the Storms in Ministry”: A phenomenological study of retired clergy and their foundational spiritual practices that anchored them through their longevity in ministry.

This study was approved by and will be reviewed by the Faculty Advisor Dr. Rodolfo Nolasco at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary along with other members of the Faculty Advisory Committee Team. Questions and further detailed will be answered by Esther Lee

What this study is about:
This study seeks to answers to: What are the common spiritual practices that the retired clergy of the United Methodist Church in the United States have found to be foundational that sustained their longevity in their ministry? And What are the common issues pertaining to spiritual growth and skills that were lacking as the retired clergy have experienced throughout their ministry that can be addressed today in inspiring current and new clergypersons?

What will be asked of you?
You will be asked to dedicate approximately 1.5 hours of undivided attention to answer questions regarding your ministry experience via in-person or video conferencing.

Risks and discomforts
Due to the reflective and genuine sharing nature of this study, some of the questions may evoke memories of trauma and other difficult experiences of your past. You are invited to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable.

Benefits
This study and results are aimed to support and encourage health and wellbeing of clergy currently serving and those considering ministry. Your involvement in this study will initiate crucial conversations about the importance of spiritual practices to be learned and lived for healthy and long ministry journeys while hopefully shaping future programs and gatherings of clergy that nurture spiritual growth and strengthen self-care practices of clergy.

Audio/Video Recording
The interview will be recorded and will be kept confidential in Esther Lee’s computer and will only be viewed by her for documentation and analysis. The recording will be destroyed at the completion and success of the project defense.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

Details such as particular names of people and places as well as specific dates will not be disclosed in any of the publications that will be shared.

Sharing De-identified Data Collected in this Research

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. Your name and names of ministry settings you disclose will be remove and replaced with coding before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information shared.. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Future use of Identifiable Data Collected in this Research

Identifiable information might be used for future research with your consent.

Taking part is voluntary

Study participant's involvement is voluntary and you may refuse to participate before the study begins, discontinue at any time, or skip any questions/procedures that may make you feel uncomfortable, with no penalty to you,

To ensure the integrity of the study, participants will be asked to be fully attentive for the duration of the interview with the least about of distractions. You may request for the interview to be divided to into two 45-minute sessions instead of one 1.5 hour session.

Follow up studies

I may contact you again to request your participation for follow up questions for clarity purposes. As always, your participation will be voluntary, and I will ask for your explicit consent to participate in any of the follow-up meetings.

May we contact you again to request your participation in follow-up questions? (Please initial)

Yes ____

No _____

Contact information:

The main researcher conducting this study is *Esther Lee*. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact *Esther Lee at eunjin777@gmail.com or 847-530-0223.*

Study participants will receive a signed copy of the consent form.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature_____ Date_____

Your Name (printed)_____

Signature of person obtaining consent_____ Date_____

Printed name of person obtaining consent_____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

- Tell me a bit about yourself. How do you describe yourself.
- Please tell me a bit about your call story and how you came to pursue and commit to the life of ordained ministry.
- How was your ordination process like? What skills, in particular, spiritual practices did you learn?
- Please tell me a bit about your ministry settings, the places you have served, your roles in them, and any significant memories about each of them.
- What are some of your most memorable experiences in ministry where you felt most connected to God? What do you attribute this experience to?
- Tell me a bit about the ministry times and the difficult, chaotic ministry times and how they shaped you as a pastor and as a person. What spiritual practices helped you stay connected to the divine?
- Tell me about your intentional times away from ministry. Did you use Sabbaticals and renewal leaves? What did you do in them? Which of them were memorable and which were not helpful?
- Did you utilize counseling, therapy, ministry coaching, and/or spiritual direction— group or one on one?
- Tell me about your experiences of successes in ministry and what you attributed to them.

- Tell me about your experience of failures or regrets in ministry and what you learned from them.
- What are some of the most useful ways to be connected to God that you used often?
- What spiritual practices would you highly recommend current and future clergy to practice regularly? What do you wish you knew about spiritual practices?
- What spiritual disciplines do you continue to practice or have taken on newly in your retirement?
- What have you been engaged in beyond your retirement?

Appendix 3

Data Charts

Spiritual Practices Before Vocational Ministry

spiritual disicplines	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
Attended church every Sunday	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Dedicated to Itineracy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
early morning worship					x		
immersion experience of other ommunities of faith						x	
Listening to his favorite hymn amazing grace	x			x	x		x
meeting with pastor/mentor	x	x	x	x	x		x
Prayer every morning	x		x		x		x
reading books	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Scripture reading daily	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
serving others	x			x		x	x
walks				x	x		
yellow- All	purple - 6/7		peach - 4/7		white - exceptions		

(Part 1) SPIRITUAL DISICPLINES	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
acknowleding duality of life	x	x	x	x	x		
alone time in the care	x			x			x
be affixed/ stand ground		x in crisis	x	x in crisis	x	x	x
be mentored			x			x	x
being in Bible study	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
bridge building				x		x	x
building clear boudaries	x	x	x	x	x	x	
colleagues	x	x in crisis	x	x	x	x	x
conference retreat	x	x	x		x	x	x
connect with other faith communities			x	x	x	x	x
counseling	x began with crisis		x began in crisis				
covenant group		x	x	x	x	x	x
critical conversations			x	x	x	x	x
daily prayer	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
deep reflection about self	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
early morning	x		x		x		x
fall back on past training		x				x	x
family's support	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

find joy in the every day		x	x	x	x	x	x
(Part 2) SPIRITUAL DISICPLINES	**R1**	**R2**	**R3**	**R4**	**R5**	**R6**	**R7**
friendships inside church	x	x in crisis especially	x	x in crisis	x in crsis	x in crisis	x
hospital stay	x in crisis						
listening to other sermons							x
listening to other sermons							x
mentoring others	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
quiet time with arts	x amazing grace		x	x movies	x	x	x
reading Bible	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
reading books	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
refect on God's love for other	x	x	x	x	x in crsis	x	x
reflect back on your call	x	x	x	x		x	x
reflection of scripture throughout the day	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
regularly seeking "home"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
roles outside local church							x
sabbatical	in dire need		x	x	x right before retirement		x cut short
Seeking adventure/move		x	x		x	x	x
seeking blessings	x in crisis	x	x	x	x	x	x
Spiritual director			x		x		
sports							x
teaching	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

teamwork	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
time with family		x	x	x	x	x	x
(Part 3) SPIRITUAL DISICPLINES	**R1**	**R2**	**R3**	**R4**	**R5**	**R6**	**R7**
Training in new skills	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
vacation/time away	x	x	x	x	x	x	x for work
walking				x	x		x
work for greater church	x		x	x		x	x
Work of justice and advocacy			x caused crsis	x in crisis	x in crisis	x	x

yellow- all purple - 6/7 peach - 5/7
green - 4/7 blue - 3/7 white - exceptions

Spiritual Practice After Retirement

spiritual disciplines	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
be mentored							x
gardening	x						
going to church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
gratitude	x		x	x		x	x
learn	x	x	x				x
meet retired clergy	x			x			
meet with colleagues	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
mentor and support other clergy	x	x		x			
mentoring	x	x	x				x
missions project	x						x
prayer	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
preach	x	x	x	x	x	x	
reading books scripture	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
searching for next thing	x				x	x	x
spending time with family and friends	x		x		x	x	x
traveling	x		x	x		x	x lives out of state
Volunteer at a church	x	x	x			x	x
writing	x	x	x	x			

key = yellow - all peach - 6/7 purple 5/7 green - 4/7 grey 3/7 white- exceptions

Regrets

REGRETS	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7
asserting more leadership			x		x		
attention to friends outside of the ministry	x					x	
earning another degree or certificate		x		x			
not prophetic enough	x			x	x		x
overworking	x					x	
prioritizing ministry over family	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
sabbatical/renewal leave		x		x	x	x	x

Yellow- All Purple- 5/7 Green-4/7 White= exceptions

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